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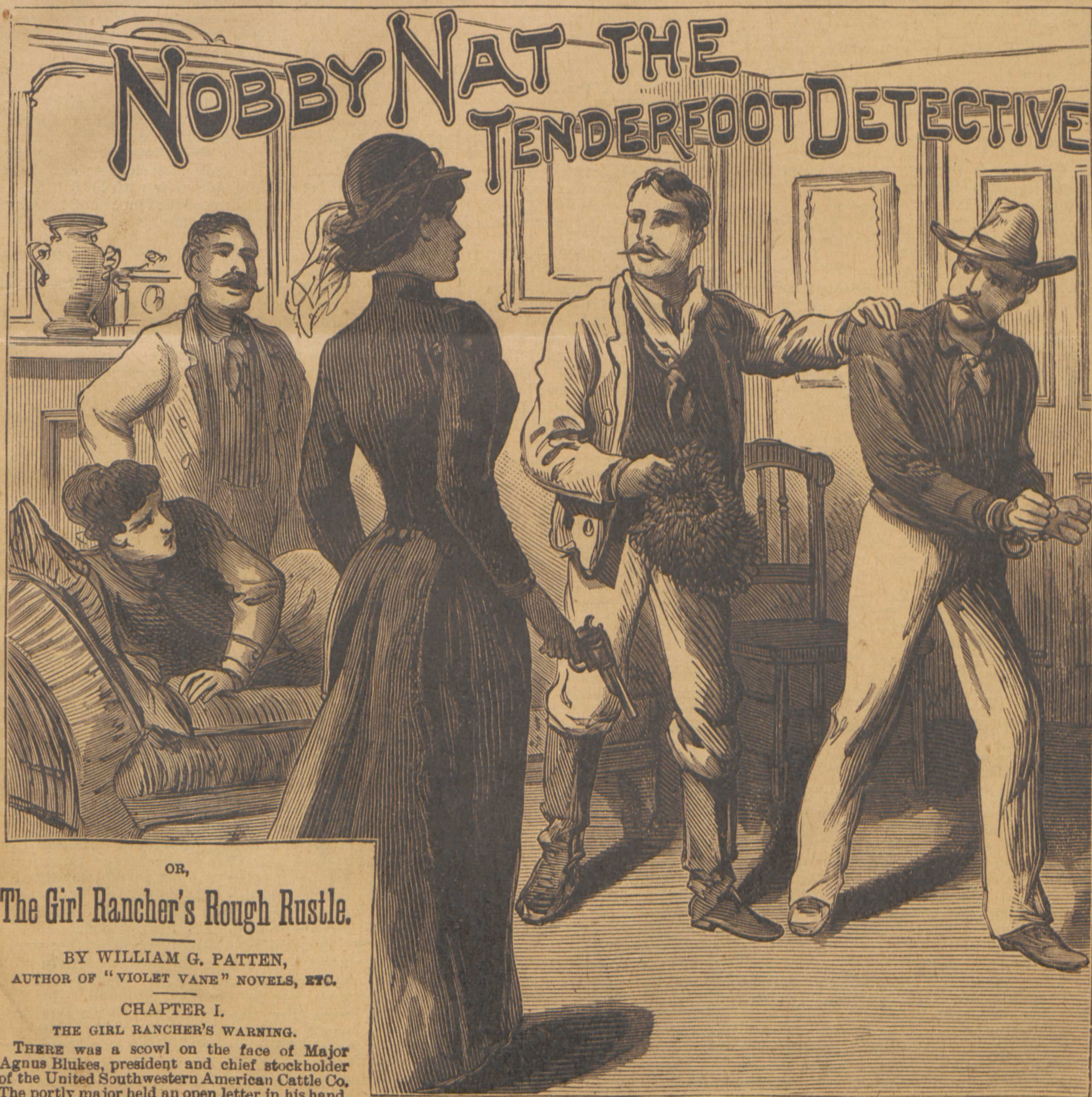
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OR,
The Girl Rancher's Rough Rustle.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GIRL RANCHER'S WARNING.

THERE was a scowl on the face of Major Agnus Blukes, president and chief stockholder of the United Southwestern American Cattle Co. The portly major held an open letter in his hand and it was evidently the contents of the epistle which caused his features to corrugate.

REMOVING THE FALSE BEARD AND WIG, OLD BILLY BEDAM STOOD BEFORE THEM THE PERFECT DOUBLE OF CARTER WAYNE!

"Well, I'm dashed if this isn't impudence!" growled the man with the letter, glaring over the top of it to meet the unsteady gaze of Mustang Harris, foreman of the new United Cattle Co.

"What does she say, major?" asked the cowboy, in a deferential manner.

"Listen to this," invited the other. And then he read the letter aloud. It ran as follows:

"CROSS BAR RANCH,
Sept. 16, 18—.

"TO MAJOR AGNUS BLUKES,
President of the United Southwestern American Cattle Co.:

"MY DEAR SIR:—I wish to call your attention to the fact that the construction of a barbed wire fence across Rocky Gap cuts off my cattle-run to Clearwater Creek. This renders Cross Bar Ranch practically worthless so far as cattle-raising is concerned, as Clearwater Creek furnishes our only available water at certain seasons of the year. In putting up such a fence you are doing me an irreparable injury without at the same time doing yourself or Lone Star Ranch any particular good. This you must certainly perceive at a glance, and I trust you will be kind enough to allow my cattle the privilege of drinking from Clearwater Creek.

"While I have in no way countenanced or encouraged the work of the 'nesters,' the fencing of Rocky Gap will certainly put me in sympathy with them, and, as my cattle must have water, I shall be forced to find a means of getting them to it. I would much rather live amicably with my neighbors than otherwise, but I cannot submit without protest to the ruining of my business. I trust you will fully appreciate the situation, and that there may be no unpleasantness or trouble.

"Yours truly,
"GERTRUDE GRANT,
"Owner of Cross Bar Ranch."

"Now, what in thunder do you think of that?" fumed the florid-faced major.

Mustang Harris nodded sagely.

"It's jest like ther gal," he declared, traces of a grin on his ugly face. "She takes arter her ole dad."

"Who is she?"

"The smartest gal thet ever roped a steer. She's clean grit all ther way through."

"What about her?"

"She took the Cross Bar arter her ole dad wuz killed. Thar was a big debt on the ranch, an' ev'rybody laughed at a gal runnin' the place—a tenderfoot gal at thet, fer she wuz born an' schooled in ther East."

"Well?"

"Waal, her ole dad wuz a tenderfoot, an' he didn't own a dollar w'en he got holt o' Cross Bar through some kind of a deal. Thar wuz a big debt on the place, an' nobody reckoned he'd lift it. He w'u'd jest ther same if he'd lived, fer it wuz 'bout hafe cleared w'en he croaked. Then the gal took the place, an' I 'low she's nigh cleared the debt."

Major Blukes grunted.

"And this girl has the cheek to send a threatening letter to me—me, President of the United Southwestern American Cattle Co. She has the gall to tell me where I can build a fence! Huh! It's nothing to me if my fence cuts her cattle off from Clearwater Creek. I propose to look out for myself and the interests of the syndicate. I know my business!"

He swelled and puffed in his pompous manner, trying to look dignified.

"Ther gal's a fighter, major," asserted Mustang Harris. "She won't be crowded a tall. Some others hev tried thet, but she showed her spunk. Arter takin' the ranch, she said she was goin' ter do ther thing up right, an' so she learned ter ride a hoss as well as her best cowboy. Then she practiced shootin' till she got it down fine—she kin drive nails with a pistol in each hand."

"With the butts?"

"Nary time; with ther bullets. An' she kin handle a rope with ther best. I've seen her fling a steer more'n once."

The major looked incredulous.

"A wonderful girl!" with something like a sneer in his voice. "She'll get in trouble when she tries to monkey with Agnus Blukes! If she joins the nesters in cutting

fences, I'll make it so hot for her in these parts that she'll be glad to get out."

"Whom are you speaking of, Major Blukes?" asked a rather handsome and nattily-dressed young man, who came sauntering out of the ranch, carelessly smoking a cigar.

"This girl, Kirk," replied the old soldier, thrusting the letter into the hands of the smoker. "Here may be some work for you. The fence cutters are going to keep you on the jump."

"That is what I expected when I came here," replied Nathan Kirk, or Nobby Nat, as he was sometimes called.

The U. S. A. Cattle Co. had an original way of doing everything, and, much to the amusement of their own cowboys, they had engaged Kirk, an Eastern detective, to investigate the fence-cutting and bring to justice the cutters. Nobby Nat had seemed to think he had a soft job, and the cattle-men had made all manner of sport of him. If there is anything the average cowboy detests it is a dudish-appearing individual, and the "Tenderfoot Detective," as Nat was dubbed, offended them by his elegance.

"Wait tell we git ther cuss alone somewhar," Iron Jaw Jim had said, significantly. "We'll make him so sick he'll throw up his job an' go back ter ther effect East—thet's w'at we will!"

And Jim's comrades had nodded and winked in a manner that showed their approval of the scheme.

Nobby Nat carried a cane usually, and that was enough to stamp him as more than "fresh." A cane might be all right in the "effect East," but a cane on a North Texas ranch—*vaugh!*

The moment the Tenderfoot Detective saw the handwriting of the owner of Cross Bar Ranch he started somewhat. Then he read the letter through to the end, a strange look on his handsome face.

"She seems to be a business woman," he observed, as he passed the epistle back to the angry major.

"Business—*business!*" puffed the other. "That's an insult to the U. S. A. Cattle Co., young man! The idea of a *girl* telling me where I can run a fence! And then she the same as threatens to join the fence-cutters!"

Nobby Nat nodded.

"That means more trouble."

"Not a great deal. If the Rocky Gap fence is cut, I'll know who did it. That'll be enough. She'll find she's got no soft-head to deal with when she braces against Major Agnus Blukes."

There was a strange twinkle in the unsteady eyes of Mustang Harris, but he said nothing. However, the look on his face was one of mingled contempt and disgust, which he artfully concealed by turning away. Evidently the foreman of the Lone Star Ranch thought very little of this blustering braggart who was his employer.

Harris had a dark record. It was said he had belonged to Mart Renshaw's Rustlers, and that there was a price on his head in Colorado. He was said to have killed his man many a time, but the powerful U. S. A. Syndicate had succeeded in obtaining his pardon, placing him at the head of their forces to lead in the battle with the "nesters," or small ranchers, who were being ruined by the erection of barbed-wire fences which cut off their water supply and their free runs.

The cattle-barons had made huge land-grabs, paying very little attention to small claims and ranches, knowing the cutting off of the water supply would mean the ruin of the small rancher, forcing him to sell his property at a beggarly figure or abandon it entirely. Thus the already wealthy syndicate would add to its riches by the downfall of those weaker than these insolent "barons."

In the "good old days" such a thing as a

barbed-wire fence was unknown, and the small rancher had an equal chance with his rich neighbor, for his herds had the run of the open plains, only guarded by the hired cowboys, and distinguished by the brand of their owner.

With the advent of the barbed-wire fence, all this changed. The cattle-kings inclosed all the land to which they had a rightful claim by entry or purchase, and much to which they had no claim at all, stretching the hated wires for miles and miles across the plains, in every case taking pains to include in their own domain all valuable watering-places—the usual method of money—to take all the law allows and as much more as it can attain.

The cowboys were somewhat in sympathy with the nester, although they were bound to work for the interest of their employers. They could see that the wire fence would soon rob them of their glory and their occupation. To day the true plains cowboy is fast becoming a mere herder, and in a few years the genus cowboy will vanish, to be known no more except in legend and story.

Major Blukes tore the letter into fragments, which he cast on the ground, grinding them under his heel.

"The girl don't want to fool with me!" he asserted.

"She'll be pretty sure ter make yer trouble, major," assured Mustang Harris. "As I said, she's clean grit. All around these yere parts she's known as Git Thar Gert. The boys say w'en she sets out to do a thing she allus gits thar with both feet."

"Bosh! I suppose the fence across Rocky Gap is being run up now?"

"Yep."

"Harris, bring my horse. I'm goin' over an' take a look at it. Reckon I'll have it built double there. Just to let this girl know I hain't ter be fooled with."

Nat Kirk sauntered to the cool veranda of the house, while the foreman hastened away to bring the major's horse.

Twenty minutes later, the old soldier started for the Rocky Gap. Being a hard-headed old fellow, he had really determined to have the fence at that point constructed double, which would mean an actual defiance to the Girl Rancher, who had ventured to mildly warn him against cutting off her cattle-run.

CHAPTER II.

GIT THAR GERT MEANS BUSINESS.

JUST as he was about to ride down into Rocky Gap Major Blukes suddenly found himself face to face with a girl who was mounted on a coal-black horse.

"Hold on a moment, sir!" she commanded, reining her animal across the veteran's path and throwing up one gauntlet-gloved hand. "I want to speak with you."

The major caught his breath.

"By Jove! she is a beauty!" he mentally exclaimed.

He was right.

The girl was not more than twenty years of age, and sat in the side-saddle like a queen on a throne. Her blue riding-dress clung to her fine figure as if she had been molded in it, the garments being plainly the work of an Eastern tailor. Instead of a regular riding hat, a grayish sombrero was planted on her head, being caught up at one side and fastened with a gold pin. Her hair was a golden bronze, and was rolled up beneath the sombrero in an artistic manner.

Sun and wind had browned her face somewhat, but her complexion, naturally of a pure, creamy tint with the healthy touch of pink, was far from being ruined. Her lips were like rose petals, and her teeth were small, square and white as milk. Her eyes were of that rare violet-blue so seldom seen.

Around this girl's waist was a silken sash which supported a brace of handsome revolvers.

The man knew in a moment he was face to face with Git Thar Gert, the owner of Cross Bar Ranch.

"Yours to command!" he said, making a military salute.

"I wish you were," she retorted. "In that case, I would command you to take down the fence you are having built across the Gap."

The old soldier hemmed a little.

"I fear I should be unable to accommodate you, my dear young lady," he finally retorted. "Much as I regret offending a charming young la—"

"That will do, Major Blukes!" cut in Gertrude Grant, rather sharply. "This is business. Compliments and flattery are at a discount, now, if permissible at any time."

The major drew himself up stiffly.

"Very well; business it is," he said.

"Do you know how much you are injuring me by putting up that fence?"

"I have not taken the trouble to investigate my neighbors' affairs."

"In that case, I will tell you. You are cutting off my water supply in the dry season."

"That is no business of mine."

"But it is mine," and the violet eyes flashed. "I know you are at the head of a powerful organization—a company that cares nothing for any one but themselves. But, I do not propose to be crushed without a struggle. How much will it cost me to obtain the right of way to Clearwater Creek by Rocky Gap?"

"I am not at liberty to sell such a right of way."

"You mean you *will not* sell it. You can do so without in the least damaging yourself."

"If the fence is not completed there, your cattle can cross the Creek and graze on the company's land."

"That can be easily remedied."

"How?"

"Run the fence across the Creek and along on the opposite side, then bring it back across the creek again. That will give my cattle a chance at the water."

The major shook his head decidedly.

"I have no authority to do such a thing."

Git Thar Gert flushed a bit.

"Then I am to be shut out from the creek?"

"It looks that way."

"That means war, major," she said, and her white teeth came together.

"My dear young woman, let me advise you not to be foolish. You cannot do anything against the powerful United Southwestern American Cattle Co."—He loved to roll the name of the syndicate off his tongue. "You will simply be butting your head against a stone, so to speak."

"Don't you be so sure of that. I shall join forces with the nesters—I tell you so frankly. All they need is a good leader, and they will make it warm for your powerful company."

"You propose to lead them?"

"If you force me to it, I certainly do!"

"In that case, you will make yourself an outlaw and a criminal."

Gert smiled.

"What *terrible* words!" she scornfully exclaimed! "And the foreman of your company is Mustang Harris, as big a ruffian and outlaw as ever cursed the country! You know that; but he is a fighter, and you have promised him protection from his old enemies if he will aid you in crushing the weak nesters. Then you talk to me of becoming a criminal!"

"Don't get excited," urged the man.

"There is no reason why you should become angry."

"There is a reason! I am not going to waste my time in talking with you, Major Blukes; but I will warn you again that the construction of a fence across Rocky Gap

will produce trouble. Your men are building it now, and I advise you to call a halt."

"Instead of that," responded the man, "I am going there for the purpose of instructing them to put it up double."

"Very well. Whatever trouble and bloodshed follows, you will be responsible for. Good-day, sir."

A touch of the rein caused the black horse to turn slightly: then the girl passed the old soldier and rode away toward Cross Bar Ranch.

"By Jove!" muttered the major, as he stared after her. "She is certainly ravishing! Hanged if I don't admire her. I'd rather like to leave her a runaway to the water, but the company would fire me if I did. It is their scheme to freeze these people out and thus get possession of their claims."

He rode down the Gap to where the men were at work on the fence, and gave orders to have it put up double. When he returned to the ranch-house, he had Mustang Harris select two men whom he detached as guards to stand in Rocky Gap all the time, except when they were relieved by two others. They were instructed to shoot any one who attempted to tamper with the fence.

"I mean business," asserted the major.

He soon discovered his enemies meant business, also, for the following morning the fence at Rocky Gap was found cut, and the men who had been posted as guards were bound hands and feet. They told how they had been surprised and overpowered in the night, after which the fence was destroyed by a party of masked men.

Major Blukes fumed.

"This is some of that girl's work!" he declared. "Now, I hain't going to stand this! I'll give her a warning, and if it occurs again—" He shook his head ominously by way of finishing the sentence.

Forthwith the old soldier wrote a scorching letter, which he directed to "Miss Gertrude Grant."

"Here, Kirk," he said, addressing Nobby Nat, "I want you to take this over to Cross Bar Ranch and deliver it to Miss Grant."

The Tenderfoot Detective hesitated.

"Why do you want me to do this?" he asked.

"It is about time you did something," was the reply. "That's what you are hired for. I want you to get a look at this girl and some of her men, so you will know them again. We are going to have serious trouble, and you will have to help us fight the fence-cutters."

The young man made no further objection, and one of the cowboys brought a saddled horse to the front of the house. When Nat came out, a knot of cattlemen had gathered a short distance away, and they grinned as they saw the tenderfoot carrying his cane.

Nat paused to button his gloves before he mounted the horse, and it was well he did. As he stood there, he detected a meaning grin on the face of the cowboy who had saddled the animal and was holding it. Then he glanced covertly around and detected the knot of cattlemen who were waiting developments.

In a moment the detective "smelt a rat."

In another moment he was unbuckling the belly-band and removing the saddle.

Beneath the saddle he found a thorn that had been placed in such a position that it would have been driven into the animal's back the moment Nat mounted.

Removing the thorn carefully, the tenderfoot re-strapped the saddle, and then turned to the cowboy at the horse's head.

"Did you saddle this animal?" he calmly asked.

"Yep, I did!" was the defiant reply.

The men were scarcely a pace apart.

Out shot Nobby Nat's gloved fist, and he

flung himself forward with the blow, adding the weight of his body.

The cowboy was struck on the chin and fairly lifted off his feet, being hurled headlong to the hard ground, where he lay like one stunned.

Without a second look at the man he had knocked down, the Tenderfoot Detective, who, it was now evident, was not so fresh as he appeared, vaulted into the saddle and rode easily away.

CHAPTER III.

PARTED LOVERS.

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, Miss Gertie." "Show him in."

A moment later and Nathan Kirk stood before the owner of Cross Bar Ranch, who was seated in her cozy little office, which she had caused to be arranged and furnished in the ranch-house.

"I presume you come on business, sir?" she said, turning.

"Gertie!"

Like a flash, she was on her feet.

"Nat!"

The word burst from her lips.

With outstretched hands, he started forward, but only to find himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver held in the small white hand of Gertrude Grant.

"Back, Carter Wayne!" she cried, her face pale as snow. "If you take another step, it shall cost you your life!"

He halted, quite confused but not alarmed.

The girl was in deadly earnest, and he knew it.

"How *dare* you come here?" she demanded, her voice shaking a bit. "Didn't I tell you I never wished to look on your treacherous face again?"

"You did," he confessed; "but you were mad."

"Not in the least. I had come to know you for what you are—a dastardly wretch! I ought to have lodged a bullet in your brain, but something stayed my hand."

"Gertrude, there is some mistake about—"

"Don't try that game!" came harshly from her lips. "It will not work with me! There is *no* mistake, Carter Wayne!"

"Why will you call me that name?"

"Because that *is* your name—or one by which you have been known."

"You are mistaken. I never heard the name until it came from the lips of your sister."

"Do you think you can make me believe that? You must think me foolish indeed! Have you not worked wretchedness enough? Why should you follow us here?"

"Business brought me here."

"Business?"

"It is true. I am in the employ of the United Southwestern American Cattle Co."

"For the first time you are openly my enemy, then. I am glad you show your colors."

"I am *not* your enemy. Gertrude, I love—"

"Stop! I shall be tempted to press the trigger! Love! Your love is like that of a serpent! Your love worked the ruin of my poor trusting sister! She believed your lying promises—she thought you a man. What is the result? She is a broken-hearted invalid!"

"I swear I never saw your sister until the day of our quarrel!"

A look of deepest scorn swept over Gertrude's face.

"You swear to anything; but, there was no mistake. Your double game was exposed. To me you were known as Nathan Kirk; to her you were Carter Wayne. I was at school, while she was studying music. We were separated, and that prevented our discovering the truth until after you had accomplished a part of your foul work. The

only mistake I made then was in allowing you to escape without marrying her. I ought to have forced you to do so."

Nobby Nat was silent for a little time.

The girl had lowered her hand, but the revolver hung by her side, ready for instant use.

"How can I prove the truth to you?"

Nat finally asked, pain expressed on his handsome face. "My pride at being misjudged has kept me from you for so long, but now fate has flung us together again. When you bade me never see you again, I meant to remain away. It was not to be."

"What brought you to this ranch?"

"This."

He took Major Blukes's letter from his pocket and placed it on her desk.

"Had I not been sent here, I should not have come. But now I am here—now I have looked on your sweet face again, Gertie, I cannot go away without attempting to convince you of the terrible error which has sundered us. You are fairer than you were two years and a half ago! I see the sunshine of happiness in your golden hair, and the light of perfect love in your violet eyes! Gertrude, for Heaven's sake do believe me when I say it is all a cruel mistake!"

She was plainly touched by his appeal, for she put one hand on the back of a chair, as if to steady herself, and she was unable to utter a word, although her lips parted.

Seeing he had reached her heart by his words, he started forward, his hand outstretched to her.

With a great effort, she lifted the glistening revolver again.

"Go!" she hoarsely commanded, feeling it were dangerous to trust herself longer. "Leave me!"

"Not yet," and he halted before her, his hand closing over the muzzle of the weapon. "Shoot if you will, but I trust you will listen. Knowing I was misjudged by you, I have been too proud to make an investigation; but now I mean to solve this mystery. I think there must have been some other person who looked like me—who was, in fact, my perfect double. It was this individual who was known to your sister as Carter Wayne. If I can find him, I can prove my innocence."

She forced a bitter smile to her lips.

"You still have nerve and cheek. This idea of a double is a device of your fertile brain. I take no stock in it, Carter Wayne! You may as well give up all hope of deceiving and making me your prey. As it is, the quicker you leave my presence the better it will be for you."

He released the revolver.

"Shoot!" came calmly from his lips. "I am tired of being misjudged by one I love far dearer than life!"

He looked squarely into the frowning mouth of the revolver, and there was not a trace of fear in his demeanor.

"I do not want your life on my hands," she finally said. "All I ask is that you will leave me and forever stay away. Up in her chamber is one who has never forgotten you, who can never forget you, although her lips seldom speak your name now. You have blighted her fair young life. The only way you can in the least make amends is by marrying her, as you promised a hundred times."

He turned sadly away.

"I see it is useless," he said, with a deep sigh. "You do not believe me."

"No."

His face hardened.

"The time will come when you will know I spoke the truth, Miss Grant. Then it may be too late. Then the world may separate us. But, I wish you to remember that through all this bitterness—through all this cruel misunderstanding, I love you still! Before all others you are the queen of my heart! Good-by!"

He turned and left the office. She stood there, listening to the sound of retreating hoofbeats until they died out in the distance, and there was a look of ineffable sorrow in her liquid eyes.

Finally, she flung herself into a chair, burying her face on her arm, which rested on her desk, and sobbing:

"Oh, that I might believe him! If it were only true, I should love him more than ever before!"

CHAPTER IV.

A PROPOSAL DECLINED.

THE sound of a step aroused the girl. Hastily brushing all traces of tears from her eyes, she looked around, discovering Hustler Hal, her foreman, had entered the room.

"Well, Richards," she said, assuming a business air, "what is it?"

The foreman was a rather handsome fellow in a rough way, but there was a dissipated look on his face. He pulled at his long mustache a moment, then said:

"I came to tell about thet thar galoot as wuz just hyar."

Gert started a bit.

"What about him?"

"He's a detective, I've heerd."

"A detective?"

"Yes, Miss Grant. He's a tenderfoot, but he's been hired by the U. S. A. Cattle Co. to trace out the fence-cutters. I reckon he'd best go back ter the East ef he wants ter keep his good health. Some of the nesters'll be fillin' him with lead."

"Are you sure he has been employed by the United Cattle Co.?"

"Dead sure."

"Well, he has undertaken a big job," said Gertie Grant, her features hardening a trifle. "I have a communication here which he brought me from Major Blukes, and I reckon it is a declaration of war."

She tore open the letter and hastily ran her eyes over the contents.

"Just as I thought," she exclaimed. "I am warned that the cutting of the company's fence will produce serious trouble. Well, that is what I expect. I can tell them the trouble will be far from pleasant for them."

At that moment there was something rather harsh about the girl's manner, but she seemed thoroughly independent and able to take care of herself. A look of admiration leaped into the eyes of Hustler Hal and grew deeper with each moment.

"I 'low thar are hot times comin'," he observed, by way of saying something.

"You are right," nodded the girl owner of Cross Bar Ranch.

"Shall we join the nesters?"

"We shall be forced to unite with them in the struggle against this big syndicate. They need a leader."

"Waal, they'll be only too glad ter hev us, an' I reckon I know who'll be the leader."

Hustler Hal meant this to be significant, but the Girl Rancher did not seem to notice it. Finding himself defeated in that way, the cowboy took another turn.

"All the same, it hain't no place fer a woman, Miss Grant. It hurts an' worries me w'en I sees you doin' the things a man oughter tend ter."

Gert forced a smile.

"Don't worry about me, Richards."

"I do worry, jest the same," he went on, with persistence, determined not to be baffled in his purpose. "I'm a plain man, Miss Grant, but I've got a right good bit of money laid away. I know you don't keer fer thet, but I jest mentioned it."

She turned full on him, wonder in her wide-open eyes.

"What in the world are you driving at?" she asked.

For a single moment he was abashed, and

then he took a step forward and dropped on one knee before her, trying to clasp her hand, as he swiftly blurted:

"Miss Grant, I love yer—I want to make you my wife! I may not hev a wonderful education, but I reckon I'm a *man* from the ground up, an' men count in these yere parts. Don't be in a hurry ter refuse me—don't! I dunno how ter say the things I wants ter—the things I feel in my heart, but you must understand me! I'll perfect you an' do this yere work you oughter hev done fer ye! I'll do anything! Hain't thar a chance—"

She had risen to her feet and remained speechless with astonishment up to this point; but now she cut him off sharply.

"Richards, you are making a fool of yourself!" she exclaimed. And then, realizing how harsh her words were, she sought to mitigate their sting.

"I am not a marrying woman."—She loved to call herself a woman. "Why, Richards, I would not accept the hand of a king! I am free and independent, and this is the kind of a life I like. Don't take offense, man; but if you get sentimental, I shall have to discharge you and get another man in your place."

He had arisen, and there was a black look on his face.

"So you refuse me?" he said, and he had suddenly dropped his cowboy dialect, speaking now with the correct pronunciation of a man of culture. "Very well; I will not make a fool of myself. I thought I would attempt to win you as a plain cattleman, and I have failed. Now I will confess I am not uneducated. In fact, Miss Grant, I am fully your equal in every way."

Her face seemed to become set like marble, but her wonderful eyes glittered in a way that told she was offended.

"It is possible you speak the truth," she said, "but you forget you are at present but one of my cowboys. With good reason, I might be bitterly offended by your words and actions. You have entirely forgotten your position. However, I do not think any woman should be angry with an honest man who is sincere in an offer of heart and hand, therefore I pardon you. I trust this will settle this matter for good."

"If anything new or important takes place, let me know as usual. You may go now."

He was dismissed, and she turned back to her desk, as if no other person was in the room. For a moment the man was tempted to leap upon her and catch that perfect form in his arms, while he devoured the soft red lips with kisses, but his better judgment prevented such a mad action. Shaking his head, he turned and walked from the room.

"This does not settle it, my proud beauty!" he savagely muttered. "I am bound to make you mine in some way! I have plotted, planned—ay, I have stained my hands with blood for you! You need not think to escape me now!"

Git Thar Gert drew a breath of relief when she heard the door close behind the form of her foreman, and in a single moment all her composure was cast to the wind. Leaping to her feet, she hurried to fasten the door.

"Gracious!" she gasped, thus giving utterance to a truly feminine ejaculation. "That fellow really frightened me! Why, he is dangerous! This is my first intimation of danger in that direction. Richards is a good man, but I shall have to handle him with gloves and still keep him in his place."

She paced up and down the little office, thinking of Nat Kirk and his visit. Her face displayed a mingling of emotions that was wonderful. In business affairs she had trained herself to carry a placid and unreadable face, but in the privacy of that room, her countenance could have been read like a book.

"He was handsomer than ever!" she final-

ly whispered, her soul in her eyes, as her mental vision contemplated Nobby Nat's manly contour of face and form. "It does not seem possible he can be such a villain—and yet—and yet—"

She walked the office floor until her excitement had passed away, and then she sat down at the desk and wrote a letter, after which she figured up some accounts. When this was attended to, she left the office and ascended to a chamber above.

"Come in," called a soft, sad voice, when Gert had rapped lightly on the door.

She entered.

Sitting in a big easy-chair near an open window was a pale, thin girl, whose cheeks were hollow and whose eyes were inexpressibly mournful.

"I knew it was you, dear," said the sad-faced girl, a wan smile creeping to her lips. "I have just been asleep in this chair and dreaming. Come here and I will tell you what I dreamed."

Her voice had a strange hollow sound that told of wasted lungs, and she would occasionally cough slightly.

Gertie sat down on a hassock at her sister's feet, having first kissed the wasted face.

"What did you dream, Ivy dear?" she tenderly asked.

"It was of him," was the answer, and the speaker did not see the cloud that crossed the face of the Girl Rancher. "I thought he came here—to see me!"

Gertie did not speak, and so Ivy continued:

"He had been searching for me a long time, and he was oh, so happy when he found me! He said he loved me still, and I looked into his eyes and saw he spoke the truth. Then we were married, Gertie! Oh, you cannot know how happy my heart was! He showed me it had all been a wretched mistake. Somehow, it seemed that in a single instant we were back in the little church at the old home and the organ was pealing forth the wedding march. And then—I awoke to find it a dream!"

She ended with a stifled sob that struck a dart to the heart to the listener. Gertie tried to speak, but found she could not utter a word.

In order to mask her emotions, the younger sister arose and secured a guitar that leaned against the wall near at hand. At first she ran her fingers idly over the strings, but in the course of a few moments she struck some chords that led her to softly sing an old song, the words of which were pathetic, and the music unspeakably sad and sweet. One stanza ran as follows:

"The Junetime may come with its roses,
And summer in sweetness be here,
Yet each year as it passes discloses
No joys like these vanished and dear.
Oh, the days that have vanished forever—
The sweet, sunny days of the past!
They will come again back to us never,
They were happy—too happy to last!"

And then, when the song was finished, Gertrude suddenly buried her face in her invalid sister's lap and burst into tears!

CHAPTER V.

THE TENDERFOOT A FIGHTER.

NATHAN KIRK'S mind was filled with strange thoughts as he rode slowly back to Lone Star Ranch. He had been face to face with the girl he loved so truly and tenderly, and she had met him with scorn and contempt. He ground his firm white teeth together, and a bitter exclamation broke from his lips.

"The time shall come when she shall believe me! I was a fool when I allowed pride to prevent my investigating the affair in the old days. Then I might have easily discovered who Carter Wayne was. I cannot for one moment believe she is not fully

sincere in thinking me a rascal. That was what hurt me so, and made me refuse to prove my innocence. I loved her so much that the thought of being doubted cut me like a knife.

"Fate has brought us together again, and I mean to do something to retrieve my lost ground. Just what that something is, I cannot tell now."

When he reached Lone Star Ranch he discovered a group of cowboys who seemed waiting his approach. In their midst was the fellow he had knocked down for putting the thorn under his saddle.

"I wonder if that means trouble?" thought Nat.

He soon found it did.

The moment the Tenderfoot Detective dismounted, the cowboy he had struck came forward, a black scowl on his far from handsome face.

"My name is Roper Dave," declared the fellow; "an' I'm a cuss."

"Well, Roper Dave, you cuss, be good enough to take care of this horse," said Nat, flinging the rein to the cattleman.

Dave gave a howl of rage.

"I'll be good enough to knock seventeen kinds of chowder out of you!" he howled, as he made a dash for Nat, his huge fists clinched.

As lightly as a cat, the Easterner skipped aside.

"Hold on! hold on!" he cried. "What is the meaning of this?"

"It means I am going to git squar' fer thet punch you guv me, dern yer!"

"Give it ter him!"

"Baste ther chicken!"

"Knock him silly!"

"Kill ther greeny!"

Uttering these cries, the rough cowboys gathered around, delight written on their faces. They were fully confident as to the result of the encounter. Of course the tenderfoot would be pounded senseless in less than a minute.

Nobby Nat seemed frightened.

"Say, say!" he squealed, dodging about and seeming to seek an opening through which he could make a break for the house. "I don't want to fight!"

"Well, you will have to, blame yer skin!" returned Roper Dave, wheeling. "I've got ther marks of your maul on me now. Do you think I'm in ther habit of bein' knocked down 'thout hittin' back? Woosh!"

"Did I hit you sir? Really, I had forgotten it."

"I'll make yer remember!"

Again the cowboy came forward.

"Put down that cane an' put up yer dukes," he commanded.

"Really—really," faltered Nat, "I fear the cane would be stolen."

"Don't be skeered; nobody wants it."

"What if I refuse to fight?"

"You'll hev ter, jest the same."

"Maybe I don't know how."

"Thet makes nary dif'."

"Are you a fighter, sir?"

"Waal, I've got a record fer ther men I've knocked out—good men at thet."

"You really frighten me!"

Dave chuckled,

"Reckon you won't be so handy 'bout hittin' a feller next time. Come, git a brace.

The tenderfoot had retreated until he could get no further away.

"How much will you take and call it square?" he asked.

The cowboys roared with laughter.

"Take? Do you think I'd settle fer money! Wow! Not much fer Roper!"

Suddenly, without the least warning, Nobby Nat dropped his cane and darted at the cowboy.

"All right, Mr. Roper Dave," he said, briskly; "if you will have fight, you shall have your fill."

Right and left Dave let his huge fists fly, but each blow was avoided with ease and grace. Then Nat Kirk came back at his foe with right and left.

Both blows landed.

Roper Dave was sent staggering, his astonishment unlimited.

"Whoopin' devils!" he roared, as he gathered himself up. "W'at ther blazes do you think your doin'? Howlin' cats! I hain't no punchin' bag!"

"I beg your pardon," smiled Nobby Nat. Did I strike you? Really, it must have been a mistake."

"Waal, you'll settle fer it!"

Snorting like a mad bull, the now thoroughly aroused cattleman came lunging toward his nimble and deceptive enemy. Nat did not find it very hard to avoid the unscientific plunges of the angry man, and he struck Roper Dave several light taps that made the cowboy's face tingle and his blood boil.

"Chaw him up, pard!" advised one of the anxious spectators. "Derned ef he hain't gittin' the best of it!"

That was more than Dave could endure. The humiliation of having a comrade believe the tenderfoot was getting the best of the bout was fairly crushing.

Like a cyclone, he flung himself at Nat, causing the detective to retreat slowly around the ring the cowboys had formed. But the natty man was simply watching his chance.

It came.

Like a flash of light, his fists flew out, one after the other, and Roper Dave went to grass.

A shout of astonishment broke from the lips of the spectators.

"Blowed ef he hain't a fighter!" cried Mustang Harris, who had just joined the gathering.

Dazed and astounded, the overthrown cowboy sat up and glared at the man who was waiting for him to arise.

"Did you hit me then?" he asked.

"I rather think I did," smiled Nat.

"An' you knocked me down w'en I was lookin'?"

"It appears so."

"Then blowed if I don't bore ye!"

The detective stopped and picked up his cane just as Roper Dave got upon his feet, snatching out a revolver.

"This'll fix you!" snarled the murderous cattleman.

Leaping forward, Nobby Nat rapped the angered ruffian on the wrist with the heavy cane, and the revolver flew from Dave's fingers, being discharged as it fell.

"Don't try that kind of a trick on me!" sternly commanded the Tenderfoot Detective.

Dave danced and howled, shaking his hand and clinging to his wrist.

"Blow yer ter blazes!" he screamed. "I'll do fer ye now!"

Nat saw him draw a wicked-looking knife. The cowboy really meant to murder his enemy.

"Put it up!" commanded the Easterner, sternly. "It will be a sorry thing for you, if you try to use it on me!"

"The Dutch you say!"

Snarling like a mad dog, Roper Dave rushed at his deceptive foe, really meaning to use the wicked knife.

Nat dodged. There was a queer click, and then he made a sword-like thrust with his cane.

A shriek of pain broke from the Roper's lips, and the knife fell from his hand, while a stream of blood ran down his fingers.

Taking out a white handkerchief, Nobby Nat coolly wiped the crimson stain from a keen and slender blade that had mysteriously appeared at the end of his cane.

CHAPTER VI.

NESTERS VS. COWBOYS.

"SATAN take him! he's cut my arm!" raved Roper Dave, as he shook the red drops from his fingers.

"You may thank your good fortune it was not something besides your arm," returned Nobby Nat. "You fully intended to kill me, and I might have sent this blade into your heart as easily as I did into your arm. I did not want your worthless life on my hands, so I cut you where it would be liable to disarm you without being in any way dangerous."

"But it wasn't fair to have a knife on the end of a stick like that!"

"Was it fair to draw a knife at all? First, you tried to shoot me when I was not looking for such a move at all. Then, failing in that, you attempted to knife me. It is a clear case of biter bitten."

The astounded cowboys who had witnessed the encounter said not a word.

Touching a hidden spring in the cane, Nat allowed the slender blade to slide back from view.

"If you desire to see me again, Mr. Roper Dave," he said, "you know where to look for me."

With that he walked deliberately toward the ranch-house, not once turning his head to look back.

Quite unaware of what was taking place outside, Major Blukes was in his private room. There Nat reported to him.

That night a party of armed cowboys were stationed at Rocky Gap, the fence having been put up again. They were instructed to "make it hot" for any persons who tried to cut the wires.

Near midnight they were startled by the sudden appearance of a horseman, who proved to be Nobby Nat.

"Look here!" cried the detective; "while you are watching here, the fence is being chopped to pieces five miles to the south!"

"How d'yer know this?" asked Mustang Harris.

"Because I just came from there, and I saw the cutters at work," was the reply.

That was enough. In less than a minute every cowboy was ready and eager to be off to the south.

Nat led the party, and they urged their horses relentlessly.

A crescent moon hung low down in the West, and hundreds of pale stars shed a white light upon the plain. The perfect peace of the beautiful night was soon to be broken by the sounds of deadly conflict.

The white light showed the dark forms of nesters at their work.

The U. S. A. Cattle Co. was being swiftly and effectively robbed of their fence.

The soft grass of the plain muffled the hoof beats of the advancing cowboys until they were close upon the cutters, who, by some rare chance, failed to discover their approach until the last moment.

With the discovery came a yell from the lips of the cowboys, and they charged down on the nesters.

"Surrender, you sneakin' whelps!" shout ed Mustang Harris.

The reply was a yell of defiance, as the fence-cutters hastily mounted their ready horses.

Then came the clash.

A lariat in Mustang Harris' hands circled through the air, and the noose snatched one of the nesters from his horse. The unlucky man's comrades were on the point of taking to flight, but they would not leave him in the hands of their foes, so they wheeled back.

Just then a black horse came thundering down across the plain, and on the creature's back was a female figure.

"Hurrah, boys!" cried a ringing musical voice. "Don't let the punchers drive you! You're better men than they!"

This brought a wild cheer from the lips of the fence-cutters.

"It's Git Thar Gert!" shouted a stentorian voice. "Hooray fer the Queen of the Nest-ers!"

"Whips, lads, whips!" cried the girl, the lash in her own hands cracking like a pistol.

They knew what she meant, and they followed her into the thickest of the fray, plying their whips with telling effect. Although the nesters were outnumbered, their sudden turn and assault took the cowboys so by surprise that Mustang Harris and his men were thrown into confusion.

The moonlight glinted on a knife in the hand of Git Thar Gert, and the blade severed the lasso that had dragged one of the fence-cutters from the back of his horse.

"Up, Bildow, up!" she cried.

Recovering from the surprise caused by the sudden turn of the nesters, the cowboys began to close in on the fence-cutters.

The Girl Rancher saw this move and realized the danger her friends were in.

"Strike at their faces!" she screamed, setting the example by cutting one of the Lone Star men across the cheek, the lash cracking loudly as the cowboy fell headlong from the saddle.

Her fighting blood was up, and she seemed like a perfect tornado. In truth, she was avoided by the cowboys, who suddenly realized what a formidable foe she was.

The nesters understood her, and their cruel whips were plied with such effect that the Lone Star men were demoralized for an instant.

Instead of meeting the fence-cutters with their own weapons, the cowboys suddenly resorted to revolvers.

Mustang Harris's evil blood was thoroughly aroused, and he bellowed:

"Shoot to kill! shoot to kill!"

"Man, you are mad!" shouted Nobby Nat, in the foreman's ear. "This is like murder!"

"Ef you're skeered, git out, tenderfoot!" sneered Harris.

And then he caught the bridle-rein in his teeth and began to work his revolvers with both hands.

Horried, Nat Kirk wheeled his horse away, only to find himself face to face with Git Thar Gert. Like a flash, the girl flung back the hand that held her whip, her eyes flashing in the moonlight. It was plain she intended to leave her mark on Nathan Kirk's face.

Like a statue the young Easterner sat on his horse, looking straight into her face, not flinching in the least.

The blow was not delivered.

"Not now!" she said, lowering the whip—"not until I am sure!"

The sharp cracking of revolvers now mingled with the pistol-reports of the nesters' whips, and the use of firearms was swiftly demoralizing the fence-cutters. Seeing this and knowing there could be but one termination of the conflict, Git Thar Gert gave the order to retreat.

There was no hesitation about obeying.

Away went the nesters, having taken to flight so suddenly that the cowboys were surprised. This gave the fugitives the start.

"After them!" yelled Mustang Harris, whose blood was thoroughly aroused.

"Come on, pards!"

The pursuit began.

On the scene of battle two dark figures were stretched on the ground, telling that the cowboys' bullets had not all been wasted.

The nesters were well mounted, and it seemed that they might get away from their enemies; but Harris chuckled with satisfaction, as he wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve.

"We've got 'em foul!" he declared.

Nobby Nat was at the foreman's side.

"Their horses are as good as ours," said the detective.

"Thet may be, tenderfoot."

"Then they will get away."

"Not much."

"Why not?"

"They're inside our preserves."

"What of that?"

"They're fenced in."

Then the detective understood the situation. The nesters were in a trap, for the barbed fence of the Cattle Co. surrounded them.

The magnificent black horse on which Git Thar Gert was mounted easily kept the lead of the fugitives. One of the men called to her that they were trapped by the fence, but she only turned her head to command them to follow her closely.

In one direction lay a stretch of twenty miles with no fence to stop them, but Gert did not choose to go that way. Instead, she made a cross-cut, actually striking for the nearest point of the barbed wire fence.

Behind them came the cowboys, now and then uttering yells of triumph, for they believed the nesters were cornered.

Again one of the fugitives called to the strange girl who, within the hour, had become their recognized leader.

"The fence! the fence!" he shouted.

She turned her head.

"All right," came back the reply. "I have some nippers."

They understood her purpose then, and a cheer broke from their lips.

Letting out the black horse, Gert was a long distance ahead of her companions when she reached the fence. In a moment, she leaped from the saddle and began work with the nippers. Her gloved fingers were strong and she soon severed the wire strands, after which she swung up to the saddle.

All this was accomplished by the time the nesters reached the spot, and she led them through the opening she had made. They turned to fling back a yell of defiance at the cowboys, who answered with cries of anger, realizing the chase was ended.

CHAPTER VII.

GERT AND HER DOGS.

FINDING the fence-cutters had escaped, the cowboys halted and held a consultation, finally deciding to return to the place where the encounter occurred.

Nobby Nat had nothing to say, but in his heart he was pleased by the escape of the nesters.

They rode back to the spot where the battle took place, expecting to find dead or wounded foes stretched on the ground.

In this they were disappointed.

The trampled ground told just where the affray occurred, but the moonlight revealed no bodies, although there were dark stains on the grass.

If any of the nesters had been slain, some of their comrades had removed the bodies.

Rod after rod of the fence had been destroyed, showing the cutters had worked diligently before they were molested.

"Hang 'em!" growled Mustang Harris, whose left cheek was a mass of dried blood. "I'll kerry this yere mark as long as I live!"

He was not the only one of the Lone Star men who were marked for life by the whips of the fighting nesters. Indeed, it was a decidedly sore and angry mob.

Harris led them back to Rocky Gap.

There they found a surprise awaiting them.

The fence had been unmercifully slashed!

"Holy Moses!" snarled the foreman,

"Some of ther critters hev bin hyer while we wuz erwayl!"

A musical laugh came to their ears, and, looking upward, they saw on the rocks far above, outlined against the starry sky, a black horse and its rider.

The rider was Git Thar Gert!

The strange girl had cut in ahead of them and made a hole in the fence at Rocky Gap.

"Dern her!" grated Mustang Harris, snatch-out a revolver. "I'll jest—"

He never finished.

Nobby Nat was close to the foreman's side, and the Tenderfoot Detective saw the deadly purpose upon Harris' moonlight-flooded face. Just as the revolver was being lifted, it was suddenly caught and wrenched from the cattleman's hand.

"My God, man!" cried Nat. "Are you aware that is a woman?"

"A she-tiger!" was the retort. "I've got the mark of her cubs across my face! Give me that gun!"

He found himself looking into the muzzle of his own weapon.

"Harris," said the Easterner, calmly, "I thought you something of a man! Can it be you would turn a gun on that girl? I won't believe it!"

A sudden feeling of shame swept over the desperado.

"I didn't mean ter no more'n wing her," he declared. "Mebbe I'd no business ter do that. I 'low she is a holy terror, an' I oughter admire her. Derved ef I don't! But w'at call hev you snatchin' a gun from my fingers?"

"The call of a man who will not see a woman injured. If I hadn't moved just as I did, you would have taken a snap-shot at her. Your snap-shots are dead sure to mean something. I would do the same thing over again."

The two men sat within arm's length and looked at each other, while the other cattlemen watched what was passing with breathless interest.

Harris had a bad record, and his comrades fully expected he would do up the tenderfoot who had dared to interfere with him in such a way.

They were disappointed.

"You're right, pard," and the foreman held out his hand for the revolver. "I was dead wrong. Gimme ther gun. We won't quarrel."

Without a moment's hesitation, Nobby Nat turned the revolver end for end, grasped the barrel and placed the butt in Harris's hand. He did not know but the desperado would take advantage of the opportunity to shoot him dead, but took his chances on that.

Harris had no thought of doing such a thing, and the revolver was restored to its holster.

Git Thar Gert sat watching the entire scene, and when Harris put up his weapon, she turned her black horse and disappeared from the rocky height.

There was no reason for remaining longer at the gap, so the disgusted cowboys rode back to Lone Star Ranch and reported to Major Blukes, who was hauled from his comfortable bed to hear a story that caused him to swear viciously.

When the major attempted to turn his wrath on the foreman, Nat Kirk promptly asserted Harris had done his best and that no one could be blamed.

"I'll swear out a warrant for her to-morrow!" declared the major.

He kept his word.

With the coming of another day, he rode to the nearest town, Prairie Valley, and consulted with a justice of the peace. When he returned, a sheriff was with him, and they proceeded directly to Cross Bar Ranch.

Some dogs came baying from the ranch-house as they rode up, and then Git Thar

Gert herself walked slowly around the corner. She paused when she saw the two men and awaited their approach.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit?" she asked, rather sarcastically.

The major made a military salute, his fat face growing crimson as his eyes wavered before the steady gaze of the Girl Rancher.

"Ahem!" and he cleared his throat. "You see—there was—that is,—ah!—well, I don't exactly know how to begin."

He saw the faintest trace of a smile creeping into the corners of her beautiful mouth, but she remained silently gazing straight at him.

Coughing behind his hand, he began again:

"I regret the necessity that makes me seem uncivil to a lady, but you must be aware you have brought this trouble on yourself. I warned you in time. Last night you were the leader of the nesters who sought to ruin the company's fence. You do not deny that?"

"Don't I?"

"Do you?"

"I don't acknowledge it."

"But you were seen."

"Very well; what of it?"

"You were violating the law."

The girl showed her milk-white teeth in a smile.

"The law, eh? So you are going to mask yourself behind the law? Do you think the law will uphold you in your work of last night? It may in this country, but your cowboys were very ready with their weapons. They were the first to draw—in fact, they were the only ones who fired a shot."

"This is as good as a confession that you were present at the encounter. Officer, arrest her."

"Officer, hold on! Let's talk this thing over a bit. I do not propose to be arrested."

"You—you—you won't resist?" spluttered the major.

"That's where you are wrong—I will!"

"It is folly."

The sheriff was on the point of dismounting, but, like a flash, a pair of handsome revolvers sprang into the girl's hands, and the weapons were turned on the two men.

"I have been forced into this affair, and I propose to fight it out," she calmly said. "Your men did shooting last night, major; but if you attempt to arrest me now, I shall try my hand."

The astonishment of the portly veteran caused him to catch his breath several times before he could utter a sound, and then he managed to stammer:

"May I be jiggered!"

"I haven't the least objection, sir," assured Gert.

"You—you wouldn't really shoot?"

"That's where you are off. I would! If you have an idea I am fooling, just jump off your horse, major."

The President of the U. S. A. Cattle Co. turned to his companion.

"Officer, arrest her!" he thundered.

A peculiar whistle came from Gert's lips, and her dogs gathered around her. Then she laughingly restored her revolvers to the sash about her waist.

"The man who attempts to touch me will feel the fangs of my dogs at his throat!" declared the Girl Rancher.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE MARRIAGE.

IN vain Major Blukes spluttered and protested. Through it all Git Thar Gert smiled calmly into his face.

"It's no use to make a fuss, major," she said. "The fight is fairly on, and I mean business. I know better than to submit to arrest now. It would be disastrous to my interests."

"I'll shoot those dogs!" fumed the president of the U. S. A. Cattle Co.

"Better not try it, dear sir," returned the nerry girl. "I can shoot a little myself, and the dogs are valuable. Even if I did not have a dog to protect me, there are several men within hearing of my voice. If I should cry out for aid, they would promptly come to my assistance."

"It can't be you know what you are doing, young woman! You are defying the majesty of the law!"

Gert snapped her white fingers.

"That for the majesty of the law! It does not count in these parts, and you know it. The majesty of might rules here."

Never had she looked more beautiful than when she boldly faced and defied those two men, and the veteran soldier could not help thinking what a magnificent creature she was.

"You are simply averting arrest for the time being," he asserted.

"Let it go at that."

Finding it useless to waste further time there, the major turned and rode away, followed by the sheriff.

Some hours later, Nobby Nat was summoned to Major Blukes's private room in Lone Star Ranch.

"I have a warrant for the arrest of this Grant girl," said the president of the cattle syndicate. "I have brought an officer from Prairie Valley, and I want her taken into custody as soon as possible. This cutting of fences must stop! I attempted to arrest her as we came along, but she resisted. Now, I want you to take the sheriff and ten of my men and go after her."

"I scarcely think I shall need the men," said the Tenderfoot Detective. "If you give me authority to cause her arrest, I will see to it."

"But you had better take the men along to make sure of accomplishing the work."

"The sheriff is the only man I shall need to take along."

"Well, if you think you can take her. But I warn you she is a tiger-cat—she shows her claws."

"I will clip them."

"All right, go ahead. The sheriff has the warrant."

The shadows of night had settled over the prairie land when Nat and the officer reached Cross Bar Ranch. Dismounting at the door, they strode boldly in.

It almost seemed that they were expected, for the door promptly closed behind them.

"Right this way, gentlemen," called a musical voice.

Walking into a lighted room, they found themselves face to face with the owner of the ranch.

She looked at him inquiringly, a strange sparkle in her violet eyes.

"You will be sensible if you submit quietly," declared Nat, rather harshly. "We are not to be trifled with. If you try to draw on us, it will be the worse for you."

Of a sudden, her eyes blazed.

"Now you are showing yourself in your true character!" cried the Girl Rancher. "You have seen fit to remove the mask! Good! I was expecting you!"

A whistle came from her lips, and in another instant the room was filled with nesters.

"Do you imagine I will submit now?" came from her lips. "These are my friends."

Nobby Nat seemed stunned.

With a wave of her hand, Git Thar Gert dismissed the nesters, and they left the room.

"They are close at hand," assured the girl. "I only have to utter the signal to bring them to my side." Then she pointed to chairs. "Sit down, gentlemen!"

They obeyed.

"I have a little business to transact with

you, Carter Wayne," continued the girl. "I fancied you would come, and I told my sister so."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. She has dressed to meet you, and there is a parson present. When you leave this house, you will be Ivy's husband!"

Nat leaped up.

"Girl, you are mad!"

"Sit down!" came sternly from the Girl Rancher's lips.

He sunk back in the chair.

"You will find I am in earnest," added Gertie Grant. "The girl you so cruelly deceived shall become your wife. Stop! Don't try to speak now! She has dreamed you would return to her of your own free will, and she must not know it was otherwise."

"But I do not understand this," protested the dazed Easterner. "You surely mistake me for some one else! I—I—"

"That will do! You should not attempt to play that game with me. It is too late—much too late. You will not deny you once played the lover to Ivy Grant?"

"Ivy—Ivy Grant! Why, she—"

"Enough! It makes no difference whether you deny it or not. I have heard you deny it times enough already. Do you see this?"

She displayed a revolver.

"Look here," broke in Nat; but he was promptly cut short.

"I am doing the talking. This revolver is loaded, and I can handle it effectively. Let that be impressed on your mind. I shall not hesitate to use it, if you act balky. That is not all."

Again she whistled in a peculiar manner, and four men entered the room, each man holding a heavy Colt's revolver in his hand.

"Gentlemen," spoke the girl, "what is your business?"

Pointing their weapons at Nathan Kirk, they replied in unison:

"It is our instructions to shoot that man the instant you signal us to do so."

Gert nodded.

"Right. Can you see him from your places of concealment outside this room?"

"We can by the aid of pistol-holes in the wall."

"Are you good shots?"

"We are dead-shots."

She waved her hand, and they filed out of the room.

Nobby Nat seemed stunned, while the sheriff looked on with wide-open eyes.

"I trust you comprehend the situation fully," came from the Girl Rancher's lips.

"I am in deadly earnest, and I mean to have my plans carried out. You wronged my sister, Carter Wayne, and this night shall see her your wife. If not that, then your friends will have the pleasure of burying you to-morrow."

There was no doubting her intense earnestness.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"No," replied Nat. "I must understand this thoroughly."

Gertie made an impatient gesture.

"You ask too much. You are in Cross Bar Ranch, and the doors are locked. You cannot escape with your life unless you marry Ivy. You have the choice between her and death, and you are to act as if you were doing everything of your own free will. The first sign of rebellion in her presence will be the signal for your death."

There could be no misunderstanding her now. Stepping to the door, she called to some one in another room. Then a man in black clothes entered.

"Rev. Mr. Jordan, this is Mr. Carter Wayne, the bridegroom, and this is a particular friend of his, who will act as best man."

The parson bowed, and, like dazed creatures, the two men returned the salute.

And now several persons entered the room and took seats. Not a weapon was in view, but Nat and the sheriff thought of the four men with Colt's revolvers who were stationed beyond the walls.

At Nat's elbow, Gertie whispered:

"I am going to bring Ivy down. I want you to greet her as if delighted. Remember the penalty of making a muss of the affair."

In another instant she was gone.

It was only a short time before the Girl Rancher returned, her invalid sister leaning on her arm. Ivy was dressed in a grayish garment, and, although she was pale and thin, a joyful light was in her eyes. The moment she saw Nat, she uttered a cry of delight, holding out her hands.

He came forward quickly.

"Ivy!" he exclaimed. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, yes!" she sobbed, clinging to him. "I knew you would come back to me—some time! I knew it!"

There was scarcely a moment's delay, for Gert hastened things as much as possible. They were soon standing hand in hand, and the parson was pronouncing the marriage service. It was all over in a few seconds, and then they were declared man and wife.

As the final words were uttered, Ivy sunk in a swoon. Kindly hands lifted her, and she was carried from the room. When Nat would have followed, Gertie warned him to keep back.

One by one, the guests filed out, and Nat was left alone with the sheriff. The two men looked into each other's eyes, but spoke not a word.

Within ten minutes, Git Thar Gert entered again.

"Now, gentlemen," she said, "you are at liberty to depart."

"But—but—Ivy—" spoke Nat.

"She has recovered."

"And am I to go away without seeing her again?"

"You are. More than that, you are *never* to see her again."

"Never?"

"That is what I said."

"She is now my wife!"

"Because you were *obliged* to marry her. It was not through any willingness of your own she became such. Knowing this, I shall not hesitate to put a bullet through your head if you attempt to molest or trouble her in any way. I am in earnest, as I have been all along. I advise you to steer clear of me in the future, Carter Wayne, for I have not one particle of love for you."

"As for Major Blukes, you can tell him it will take his entire army to put me under arrest, and even then he may not succeed."

She showed them the door, and they found two men standing by their horses outside. Still acting like persons dazed, they mounted and rode away, Cross Bar Ranch at their backs.

CHAPTER IX.

A QUEER OLD CUSTOMER.

FOR a long time the two men rode silently through the night, headed toward Lone Star Ranch. The soft moonlight flooded the plain, and a black shadow clung close on the left of each horse and rider.

Nobby Nat was the one who broke the silence.

"Sheriff."

"What?"

"Do you want to make fifty dollars without a struggle?"

"You bet!"

"Then you only have to keep your mouth shut concerning what transpired last night. I have no fancy for having the story told at Lone Star. Are you mum?"

"Fifty will close my mouth so tightly that dynamite can't blow it open."

Three pieces of yellow money clinked musically as they passed from hand to hand.

Although the midnight hour was past when Lone Star Ranch was reached, Major Blukes was awaiting their return.

"Where is your prisoner?" he asked.

"We were unable to take her, major," replied Nat. "We did our best, but she had a gang of nesters at her back, and that foiled us."

"By the thunders of Jove!" roared the veteran, smiting his fists together; "I'll bring her to time! So she has a gang of nesters to defend her? Well, I'll try to forget she is a girl. She has sacrificed her right to be treated as such."

He spent much of the remainder of the night planning his future campaign, Nobby Nat being taken into his confidence.

Early the following morning, a strange-looking old fellow rode up to Lone Star Ranch. The man appeared to be at least sixty years of age, and he was mounted on an aged white horse that seemed scarcely able to hobble along.

"Whoa, Jiniuary!" he cried, in a cracked tone, pulling hard on the bit even after the animal had halted. "Don't be so dad blamed coltish, ye onery pestiferous critter! Seems like you'll never git the fire o' youth outer your veins. If you don't stop actin' this yere way, I'll swap ye off fer a muel—darned ef I won't!"

Mustang Harris and two other cowboys approached.

"Is this here Lone Star Ranch?" inquired the stranger.

"I reckon," replied the foreman.

"Feller called Major Blukes runs it, I 'low?"

"He do. Who be you?"

"I'm Ole Billy Bedam; us'ter be in his rigimint. Reg'lar ole sojer. Thought I'd like ter see ther major an' hobnob a bit with him. I know he'll be tickled ter death ter see me. Whoa, thar, Jiniuary! Hang this critter! Next time I buy a hoss, I'll git one thet'll stand."

The old white horse had not stirred; in fact, the animal was standing with lowered head and closed eyes, evidently fast asleep.

"Reg'lar wild charger, eh?" questioned Harris, with a grin.

"Thet's w'at he is!" nodded the gray-beard.

"How much will you take for him?"

"Now, don't mention that! I may talk, but I can't think o' sellin' Jiniuary. It'd break my heart ter lose him. Then, ef I wuz goin' ter dispose of ther onery critter, I'd sell him to somebody as wanted a reg'lar race-track speeder."

The old stranger seemed quite in earnest, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that told of a bantering nature.

Leaving the horse where he had halted, Old Billy Bedam, as the eccentric individual had designated himself, coolly walked into the house and called for Major Blukes.

"Gotter see him on powerful 'portant business," he asserted, and he was soon standing before the president of the cattle syndicate.

"Howdy, major," and Old Billy made a military salute, after which he removed his hat, showing a dirty bandage about his head. "I'm powerful tickled to see you. It's bin a great big time sence we fit together in the same company, an' I 'low you hev fergot me."

"I must confess I have," said the major.

"Were you a soldier?"

"Weere I? Waal, I sh'u'd say I *were*! I'd 'a' wore straps ef I'd wanted 'em."

"Then you were not ambitious?" smiled the president of the great cattle syndicate.

"Waal, you see I knowed I wuz ignerent as a hoss, an' I didn't want ter make a fool o' myself. I hain't natterally modest, but I hain't no fool, though you might not s'pect it to look at me in the daytime."

"What can I do for you?"
"Oh, I've come ter do somethin' fer you."

"Ah?"

"Yep; goin' ter give ye a pointer."

"How much will it cost?"

Old Billy drew himself up with injured dignity.

"Nary blamed red! I'm no bum, ef I do look onery an' seedy."

"What's your object?"

"To benefit an ole comrade."

"Very kind! I am listening."

"Then I want ter tell ye ter look out fer thet tenderfoot."

"Who?"

"Call's hisself Nat Kirk, I reckon, though his real name is Carter Wayne."

"What of him?"

"He'll sell ye ter ther nesters."

"What makes you think so?"

"I hev good reasons."

"Name them."

The old man shook his head.

"Can't do it now."

"Why not now as well as any time?"

"Now, you're doubtin' me, major; thet's why you are crowdin' me inter a corner with questions. Thet hain't right. I hev come of my own free will, an' I don't ax nothin' fer w'at I tells ye. Take my word, an' let it go at that."

"How can I know you speak the truth? I have no reason to doubt Kirk. You are an utter stranger to me—"

"But an old sojer."

"So you say."

"Do you doubt thet?"

"I may."

The old man assumed an injured air.

"All right! all right!" he repeated. "All ther same, I warn ye ter look sharp, major. Kinder keep track of this yere critter, an' see ef he don't try some crooked turn. Jest you ax him ef he ever heerd o' a man called Carter Wayne, an' you see ef he don't look broke up. A man-as tries to work hisself off as somebody else is shorely crooked."

"I do not understand how you happen to know so much about him."

"I'm his enemy, major, an' I'm playin' ter throw him cold. That's the size o' it."

"Bring me proof he is crooked."

"Now you're axin' too much. Thar hain't no reason why I sh'ud do that, even ef I c'ud. All ther same, he's a snake. He'll bite w'en ye least suspect it. Thet's all, major. Good-day."

Rather hastily the old man bowed himself out of the room.

He found several cowboys gathered near the old white horse at the door. The animal still seemed asleep.

"Hold on, old coon," commanded Mustang Harry. "I want to talk with you."

"Hain't got enny time ter waste talkin'," was the retort, as Old Billy pulled himself laboriously into the saddle.

"I believe you are a spy for the nesters," declared the foreman, his manner being somewhat serious. "You don't b'long round hyer."

The stranger turned a scornful glance on the cowboy.

"You're a knowin' galoot!" came sarcastically from his lips. "You give me pains! Go off somewhar an' fall on yourself!"

"Ketch holt of ther old hoss's tail, Jackson!" shouted Harris. "Hold the beast while I pull this old whelp off an' examine him!"

One of the cattlemen promptly caught "Jinuary's" tail and hung on.

Not long!

"Bounce him, hoss!" squealed Old Billy Bedam.

Up went the creature's head and out shot one hind foot, striking Jackson in the stomach and hurling him nearly ten feet. When the cowboy struck the ground, he did not get up at once.

"Scoot, Jinuary!"

Like magic, the white horse shot away, swiftly cutting around a corner and disappearing.

"Ta, ta, snoozers!" shrilly laughed Old Billy, as he vanished.

After a moment of motionless astonishment, the cowboys ran to the corner. There they saw the white horse dashing away at wonderful speed, while its master was waving his hand derisively at them.

With a volley of violent language, Mustang Harris pulled his revolvers and blazed away. The others followed his example, but the strange old man seemed to bear a charmed life, for, although bullets whistled all about him, neither he nor his horse were touched.

They were soon beyond pistol-shot.

CHAPTER X.

OLD BILLY ASKS QUESTIONS.

OLD BILLY BEDAM turned up at Cross Bar Ranch some hours later, cheerful and chipper.

"I've heerd 'bout this yere trouble over ther barbed-wire fences," he said, speaking to Git Thar Gert, "an' I jest drapped down in these yere parts to see of I c'udn't git a job fightin'. I'm a great fighter, by thutter, an' my hoss, Jinuary, is a clipper. We'll make a hull team with a brindle bull-purp thrown in. Oh, you need us."

"What do you want to do?" asked the Girl Rancher.

"Fight—fight like thunder. You most probblikely hev heerd thet thar classic leetle pome with a line 'bout lettin' dogs delight to bark an' bite, fer 'tis their nater to. Waal, I'm somethin' like a dog in thet respec'. I jest eternally revel in a good squar' fight. They say you're ther Queen o' ther Nesters, an' so I kem to you fer a job."

She looked him over suspiciously, shaking her head.

"I don't think we need you."

"Now, *don't* say thet! I'm out of a job, an' I'll fight cheap. Tried to strike a bargain with Major Blukes, but he don't need any help, so I kem over hyer. I told him I b'longed to ther army, but ther only army I ever hed anythin' ter do with was ther Salvation Army. I beat a drum with them oncet. He didn't seem ter put any confidence in my word, so I moseyed away, folered by eighteen or twenty bullets. Say, ef the nesters can't shoot no better'n them fellers over thar, thar hain't no reason why any damage sh'ud be did."

Although the old fellow eloquently urged his cause, and boasted of his qualifications of a fighter, he did not succeed in impressing the Girl Rancher, and he was curtly dismissed.

Growling to himself, he went out to where his horse was standing, finding Hustler Hal, the foreman, near at hand.

"I hain't 'preciated," Old Billy growled.

"I can't seem ter strike a job."

Hustler Hal was in a bad humor, and he growled:

"You'd better take yer old hoss an' go off somewhar to die!"

Billy paused and looked at the foreman keenly.

"W'ot do *you* know 'bout dyin'?" he finally asked.

"I reckon you know a heap sight more 'bout killin'."

Hal started.

"What in blazes do you mean by that, Old Bones?" he snarled, advancing on the queer stranger.

"Jest erbout whut I sed."

"Blame your old mug! Do you insinuate—"

"Mebbe I do," cut in the old fellow, boldly. "Anyhow, I seemed ter hit whar I aimed by ther way you squirm."

"I'll teach you manners!" snarled the cowboy.

"You don't know manners ter teach,"

Thoroughly aroused, Hal rushed furiously at Old Billy. The man did not seem alarmed at all, and easily avoided the blow which the foreman aimed at his face.

"How does this fit?" he inquired, as he struck the Hustler fairly under the ear.

Down went Hal.

Calmly mounting the old horse, Billy Bedam rode away, singing in a cracked and wheezy voice:

"Sing on, pray on, ye followers of Emanuel,
Siag on, pray on, ye followers of the Lamb."

The blow must have been a terrific one, for Hustler Hal was stunned and lay still for some time. When he sat up and looked around, the man who struck him was far away.

Fuming and furious, the cowboy scrambled to his feet.

"That old devil knows too much to live! I'll have his life!"

In a few minutes, Hal had his horse saddled and bridled and was away in pursuit of the strange old vagrant.

It was some time later that Git Thar Gert came from the house and looked about for Old Billy, having suddenly conceived the idea that the stranger could tell many things of interest, if he chose.

Hal had left word that he would soon return, and some words he dropped showed he was going in pursuit of the stranger. Gert looked serious when she heard this.

"Saddle my horse," she ordered.

To Hal's surprise, the white horse which Old Billy bestrode made very good time. Pricking his own animal with the spurs, the cowboy kept steadily on the trail.

The strange old man headed directly for a particularly rough and rocky section of the country, and the pursuer saw him disappear amid the gullies and ravines.

Hal urged his horse faster than ever, plunging blindly into the cut where Old Billy had vanished.

Of a sudden, a man rose from behind some rocks, a lariat shot through the air, the noose settling over the cowboy's shoulders.

Then Hal was snatched from his animal's back, striking the ground with such force that the breath was knocked from his body.

When he recovered in a measure from the shock of the fall, he found Old Billy Bedam bending over him. He tried to rise, but discovered his hands and feet were securely tied.

"Take it cool, pard!" suggested the vagrant, grinning cheerfully. "Don't git excited an' make a 'tarnal row, for you'll only waste yer breathe. I like ter see a man as kin allus adopt hisself ter circumstances. Thet's ther kind o' a coon I be. I don't mind a tinker's hurrah whether I'm on top or underneath."

"You miserable old devil!" panted the cowboy, straining at the cords. "You shall suffer for this!"

"Tut, tut, tut!" cautioned the other, seating himself on a convenient stone and calmly watching the contortions of his helpless captive. "Never make threats w'en ye're in this kind o' fix. It mayn't prove *healthy*. Fellers allus wants ter look sharp as ter his ginerel health. Thet's ther way I kim ter live so long an' keep so kinky. Why, I'm as spry as I uster was, or more so."

A few feet away stood the queer vagrant's wonderful old horse, and the animal seemed sleeping again. Like its master, the creature was most deceptive.

When the first burst of anger had passed, Hustler Hal asked:

"What is the meaning of this, old man?"

"Oh, I wanter hev a leetle chat with ye," replied Billy.

"Is that an excuse for this outrage?"

"Derned ef you don't talk jest like a stage villian! I went to a play up in Denver oncet an' saw the villian prance round. Somehow he looked monst'us like you. He wuz a devil, fer he'd killed a man jest ter meery

his daughter an' git holt o' some property. The man he killed hed found out he wuz a villain, an' wuz goin' ter fire him. It's derved queer how much he looked like you!"

The captive's face had paled strangely, and he growled:

"What do I care about that, old fool! Don't talk to me of your stage villains!"

"I reckon you don't like ther comparison," grinned Billy Bedam, running his fingers through his shaggy whiskers. "Somehow, I got a noshun you hev bin doin' somethin' that makes ye feel guilty. I hope you hain't bin killin' nobody fer ter git ther gal an' money?"

"Curse you!"

"That's wicked—awful wicked! Seems to me I heerd a story 'bout Graham Grant, owner o' ther Cross Bar, being killed. I don't s'pose you know ary derved thing o' thet?"

"Who are you, old man?"

"Me? Oh, I'm only jest Billy Bedam. I'm a worthless ole rip."

"You are not what you seem."

"Think so?"

"I know it."

"Mebbe you're right, an' then ag'in, mebbe not. I reckon you wuz follerin' me ter find out 'bout this yere p'int. It's dangerous chasin' Ole Billy, fer he has a way o' bobbin' up serenely. I reckon I'd better look through your clothes an' see w'at I kin find."

"Do so, if you dare!"

The vagrant laughed.

"Can't skeer me thet way," he asserted.

"You are making yourself a highway robber!"

"All right; I don't keer."

Despite Hustler Hal's furious threats, the old man sat on his chest and searched his pockets thoroughly, examining everything brought to light. At length, he discovered a handsome gold watch in a hidden pocket. On the inner side of the watch case was a monogram, the lettering being "G. B. G."

Old Billy whistled softly as he looked the watch over.

"I 'low G. B. G. stan's fer Graham B. Grant," he observed. "I wonder how you kem ter hev this ticker?"

The cowboy was sullen and silent.

"Lost yer tongue, eh?" went on the vagrant. "You may hev ter talk right soon. Did you ever know a fellow called Colt Harvey?"

The foreman of Cross Bar Ranch turned very white.

"Colt Harvey?" he repeated. "No, I never knew a man by that name."

Just then the rattle of iron hoofs came to their ears, and Old Billy started to his feet, being in time to see a black horse come into view, bearing a rider on its back.

The rider was Git Thar Gert.

"I'll see you later, mister," grinned the vagrant, as he suddenly hastened to his horse and climbed into the saddle. "Good-day!"

Away went the white horse and its queer master.

CHAPTER XI.

VANISHED.

GIT THAR GERT leaped from her horse as she reached Hustler Hal's side.

"What's the meaning of this?" she cried.

"It means that old devil is a ruffian!" replied the foreman, entirely forgetting his dialect. "Cut me free—*quick!*"

The Girl Rancher lost no time in doing so. Leaping to his feet, Richard gave a peculiar whistle that brought his horse trotting to his side.

"Come on!" he exclaimed. "Let's run the old whelp down! He can't escape us!"

In another moment they were away after Old Billy, who had disappeared down the ravine.

"What was he up to?" asked the girl.

"He was going to rob me," replied Hustler Hal, "but your appearance prevented his accomplishing his purpose. He did not get a thing of mine."

"This for all of the fact that the vagrant had carried off the watch marked 'G. B. G.'"

"How did he happen to have you in such a position?"

"Took me by surprise—roped me, like I was a steer."

"You were following him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I thought him crooked, and I meant to find out."

"Well, you succeeded."

"I should say so!"

They caught a glimpse of the rider of the white horse far ahead. He was looking back to see if he was pursued, and in the most saucy manner imaginable he waved his tattered hat at them.

Hustler Hal's horse was a fine animal, but it was forced to strain every nerve to keep up with Git Thar Gert's noble black. They were making great "time," still they did not seem to be overhauling the deceptive old rascal on the white steed.

The pace proved too much for the cowboy's animal, and he finally began to show signs of lagging. Then they came from the ravine and saw old Billy Bedam further away than ever.

Richards might have uttered some unprintable words if his companion had not been Git Thar Gert. As it was, he raved madly.

The Girl Rancher was cool.

"It's no use, Richards," she said; "your horse is no match for that old fellow's white nag, and you cannot keep pace with Midnight, so you may as well turn back."

"And you?"

"I am going to John Killbuck's. There is to be a meeting of nesters there this evening. I can still keep on my way by following this mysterious man."

The foreman could see that was the only course for him to pursue; so, with some parting words of caution, he halted, allowing Gert to continue the pursuit.

"May Satan catch that old imp!" grated Hal. "Who is he? and what is he? Hanged if I am not beginning to fear him! Why, what does he know of Colt Harvey? And what does he know of that other affair? I would give five hundred dollars for that watch!"

"Will Gert be able to overtake him? If she does, it would be like her to march him back to Cross Bar at the mouth of her revolver. That is the handsomest and nerviest girl I ever saw. Every day that passes sees me growing more and more madly in love with her. She *shall* be mine! I swear it, now!"

He sat there until pursued and pursuer were but specks against the horizon, and then he turned his horse's head toward Cross Bar Ranch.

The Girl Rancher had resolved Old Billy should not escape her. She did not believe there was a horse in the entire country equal to her Midnight, and she was confident of finally overhauling the rider of the white animal.

But never was there a greater deception than that miserable-appearing old white nag. Although Midnight did his best, he was unable to gain a foot on the animal; in fact, Gert was forced to confess the white horse was widening the distance.

At last, she gave up the chase, for it was beginning to take her somewhat out of her way.

The succeeding night proved to be somewhat overcast, and it was at a late hour when the girl reached a swell overlooking Cross Bar Ranch. Not many girls would

have possessed the nerve to be abroad on the lonely prairie at that time of the night, but Gertrude Grant was not built of common material.

The moment she reached the crest of the swell, she discovered something unusual had occurred at the ranch, for lights were flitting here and there. Even as she looked, a bright glare sprung up at one of the upper windows.

FIRE!

She knew in an instant the ranch was threatened, and, with her heart in her mouth, she plied the whip and went thundering down toward the house.

Something told her her enemies had been at work.

"If so, they are dastards!" she muttered, moistening her dry lips with her tongue. "Nobody but the most miserable cowards would resort to such a means of warfare against a girl!"

As she approached the house, she saw with relief that the fire was not gaining headway. In truth, it was being subdued.

Then a sudden cry broke from her lips.

The flames were in Ivy's room!

Again Midnight felt the cruel whip, wielded with all the strength of his fair mistress's arm.

In a few moments the ranch was reached, and, flinging the magnificent black on his haunches, the girl leaped to the ground.

"What has happened?" she demanded, catching a cowboy by the arm. "How did this fire start?"

"Looks like it was sot, miss," was the reply.

"Set—and in Ivy's room! Where is my sister?"

"I hain't seen her, miss!"

Up the stairs dashed Gertie Grant. The fire was quite out when she reached the chamber above, and Richards, with one or two others, were contemplating the ruin it had wrought.

Gert caught the foreman by the arm.

"Where is Ivy?"

"Haven't seen her," he replied.

"Then search for her!" screamed the Girl Rancher. "Scatter—search! Find her!"

They did search, but they did not find the missing one.

"Merciful Heaven!" cried Git Thar Gert. "Is this a blow from my enemies?"

CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT FLIGHT.

No one saw the dark figure that crept down on Cross Bar Ranch an hour before Git Thar Gert's return.

"If those infernal dogs do not scent me, I am all right," muttered the prowler.

Everything seemed silent about the ranch. From one of the upper windows shone a faint light.

"That's Ivy's room," observed the man. "Ha! ha! Ivy, my fair young bride! The girl is still madly in love with me. If everything works right, I will lure her away to night, while Gert is absent."

Somehow, both the voice and the figure were like those of Nathan Kirk.

Beneath the window from which glowed the light ran up a trellised frame for the support of some vines. The prowler paused there and examined the framework.

"It's risky, but I am going to try it," he muttered.

Then he ventured his weight upon the trellis.

It supported him.

Slowly and surely he climbed toward the lighted window. The framework cracked beneath him and threatened to go down, but it still stood.

In a few moments he had reached the window. To his disappointment, a gauzy curtain hid the interior of the room, the light being burning near the curtain.

Cautiously he tried the window, and he

gave a soft chuckle of satisfaction when he found it could be raised. Making as little noise as possible, he slowly lifted it.

A minute later he was able to sweep aside the curtain and look into the chamber.

Ivy Grant was sleeping on a bed, near the head of which the lamp was burning. There was a smile on her wasted face, and she seemed to be dreaming pleasant things.

The man stepped into the room and closed the window as noiselessly as he had opened it, a breath of relief coming from his lips when he was fairly inside, and the curtain guarded the window once more.

For some moments he stood regarding the sleeping girl, and then he advanced cautiously to the bed, on the side of which he sat, covering Ivy's mouth with one hand.

The girl awoke with a start, and would have screamed but for the hand over her lips.

"Be still, Ivy, dear!" he cautioned. "It is I. You need have no fear of me."

She lifted a hand and gently removed his palm from her lips.

"It is truly you, Carter?" she whispered, joy expressed on her pale face.

"Truly, darling!" he assured. "Your sister warned me never to attempt to see you again, but shouldn't a husband see his wife?"

She sat up and put her arms about his neck.

"You are my husband, and you really love me?"

"Do you doubt me?"

"No, no! I'll never doubt you again! I was just dreaming of you, and I thought you were going to take me far away to some happy land—some sunny land where my poor lungs could heal. Sometimes, Carter, I have thought I should die without ever seeing you again; but now you have returned to me, it seems that I shall get well."

"Of course you will. If you are ready to go, we will start for that sunny land this night."

She could scarcely repress a cry of joy.

"Do you really mean that?" she eagerly asked. "Shall we go far, far away?"

"Yes, dear."

"How can we? How did you get into this room? I do not understand it. I was dreaming you were here, and then I awoke to find my dream true."

"Don't ask questions now. Our only thought must be to get out and away without being discovered. Remember I am your husband. Get up quickly and dress."

She only hesitated a moment, and then, with nervous haste, she began to don her clothes. While she was doing this, he tried the two doors of the chamber, finding both were locked on the inside.

"By which of these shall we go out?" he asked.

"Either," she replied. "But the one to your right is the handiest to the stairs."

It did not take her long to dress, for he was constantly urging her to hasten. She did not see him stoop and put something amid the lace curtains of the windows just where they touched the floor—something that made the faintest whirling sound the moment he pressed a tiny button. She did not even hear the whisper-like whirr.

"There is no time for doing up your hair, dear," he said. "That can be done after we get far away. Take your warmest wraps, for the night air is a trifle chilly."

She obeyed him as if she were a child.

In a few moments they were ready to leave the chamber.

"The moment we are outside, I will lead the way," he said; "but you must get us out."

Taking his hand, she led the way through the darkness of the passage and down the stairs. The door was silently unfastened, and then they were in the outer air.

At that moment, the dark figure of a four-footed animal came swiftly toward them.

"It's one of those infernal dogs!" whispered the man. "He will betray us."

The dog growled, but Ivy spoke softly to him, and he was silenced. He came up and rubbed his head against her, sniffing suspiciously at her companion, while she patted his head with a gloved hand.

Supporting her with his arm, Carter Wayne—he had confessed that was his name—urged her toward the little hollow where his horse was picketed.

They were some distance from the ranch when Ivy suddenly halted.

"Oh, Carter!" she sobbed. "Must I go away without seeing my dear sister again? She has been so kind and good to me!"

"It is impossible for you to see her again, darling," he firmly replied.

"It seems as if I am doing something wicked in deserting her like this."

"Nonsense. This is the only way you can get away. She has threatened to shoot me on sight. If she were to see us now, she would ruin everything."

"She has told me many times that you were a villain."

"I have not a doubt but she honestly thinks so, for fate has made me look bad to her."

"But, you—you did not tell me the truth once."

"We have no time to talk of that now. I know I promised to marry you; but haven't I kept my word? All you can say is that I delayed the marriage."

"And that delay nearly killed me, dear Carter. You cannot know how much I have suffered. Still, you came back to me at last, and I ought to be satisfied—I am satisfied!"

"Then come on."

She offered no further objection, and they soon reached the horse. He assisted her upon the animal's back, and then he also climbed up.

"Sunrise will see us many miles from here," declared Carter Wayne. "Nobby Nat is not liable to ever return to Lone Star Ranch. They will have to catch their nesters without my aid."

As they rode slowly up out of the hollow, a little cry broke from Ivy's lips.

"Look!" she whispered, grasping his arm—"look! The ranch! the ranch!"

He looked and saw the red glare of flames in the window by which he had entered Ivy's room. He knew his fire-box, which he had concealed amid the curtains, had done its work, and his heart leaped with joy at the thought that Cross Bar would lie in ashes on the morrow.

Then there was a sudden commotion at the ranch. Faint shouts came to their ears, and lights were seen darting swiftly about.

"It is a fire, but they have discovered it," he explained. "They will easily extinguish it."

Just then, outlined against the sky, a horse and rider appeared on the crest of the ridge to their right. For a moment the horse paused, and then a cry broke from the rider's lips. A moment later the animal was dashing madly down toward Cross Bar Ranch.

"That was Gertrude!" exclaimed Ivy.

"I think you are right," confessed Carter Wayne. "She will discover you are gone, and if they overtake us, she will tear you from me."

"Then let's hurry!" she panted. "Let's ride as fast as we can! It would kill me if we were parted now—yes, darling, it would kill me!"

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD BILLY ON HAND.

THE clouds were parting to allow the moonlight to sift through when Carter Wayne drew rein and listened.

"What is it, dear?" asked Ivy, clinging to him.

"Can't you hear it?" he asked.

Through the night came a mournful howl that was full of sad music.

"Is it a dog?"

"Yes—a bloodhound! Is there such a creature amid the dogs of the ranch?"

"Yes; one of the dogs is part Siberian."

"Then," grated Wayne, "that dog is on our trail! We are being run down with a bloodhound!"

He took out his revolvers and examined them by the sifted moonlight, his manner showing his resolve.

Ivy clung to the man in whom she had placed so much confidence, trembling and silent.

They rode on again, the sound of the dog's baying growing plainer with each moment.

Finally they came to a place where Wayne drew rein, sitting silently looking back along the course they had come, a revolver in his hand.

Nearer and nearer approached the baying hound, the music of his voice ringing through the night. In a short time a dark figure appeared and came bounding toward them, giving voice madly.

The man lifted his revolver, his nerves perfectly steady, and a burst of flame broke from the muzzle of the weapon. Once, twice, three times he fired—and still the dog came on. With another leap, he would reach them.

Then came the fourth shot.

Up into the air sprung the dog, but he fell short of his prey, striking the ground with a sodden sound.

He did not rise, the last bullet had passed through his heart!

With remarkable coolness, Carter Wayne cast out the old shells from his revolver and replaced them with good ones, after which he said:

"We will go on now. The cowboys cannot be far away, but they will not have the hound to guide them on the trail."

Ivy was still silent.

Away went the doubly burdened horse, its master selecting a new course. He knew he must throw the cattlemen from the scent before dawn, for they would surely run him down if he did not.

Again the black clouds drifted over the face of the moon, and a slight dash of rain came down.

Carter Wayne laughed.

"This will cover the trail," he said. "There is no fear of further pursuit."

The rain stopped and the heavy clouds drifted down the sky. One by one, the silver stars peered tremblingly through a sea of purple haze, and the sweet breath of the great plain softly touched the fugitives' cheeks. A shower was a rare thing in that locality at that time of the year, being no more than a faint dash of moisture when it did come, but it was enough to make the world seem fresher and purer.

Soon the east took on a slender streak of gray, which slowly broadened and was finally tinged with red. Then great shafts sprung up into the sky like lances of steel. The dome of heaven was emblazoned with many glowing colors, and then the sun pushed up into view.

The night was past.

They entered some broken hills, and down in a wooded valley they came upon an old hut. Wayne's shouts brought a half-blood Indian to the door.

"Hello, Prince!"

"How!" grunted the half-breed.

"Will you do me a favor—for money?"

"You bet!" was the prompt reply.

"Prince will do anything for money."

Wayne dismounted, assisting Ivy to the ground. The poor girl was so exhausted she could not stand, and he was forced to

lift her in his arms and carry her into the house. She clung about his neck, her cold cheek touching his face.

Within the hut he placed her on a rude couch. She was quite exhausted, and she looked like one from which life had departed as she lay with closed eyes.

"Gal sick?" asked Prince.

"Yes," replied Wayne. "I must leave her in your care for a time."

Ivy heard, and her eyes quickly opened.

"Oh, Carter!" she weakly cried; "you are not going to leave me, are you?"

"Only for a little, Ivy. Now, don't be a fool!" he added, as he saw she was about to plead for him to remain with her. "I have some business I must attend to before I can leave. I will not be long from you."

"Oh, I am so weak—so tired!" she sobbed. "I do not want to be left alone, Carter—I didn't want you to ever leave me again! I didn't know I was so weak."

"Now, you are silly!" he roughly declared. "You will be safe here with Prince, and I will come for you in a short time. You must trust me."

He sat down by her side and coaxed her into submission, although she was weeping when he left the hut.

The half-blood followed him outside.

"What matter with gal?" he asked.

"She is going to die, I reckon," replied Wayne, heartlessly. "If I had known she was so far used up, I'd never taken the trouble to sack her. I was a fool, but it is done now."

"You care for her?"

"Bah—no! She is nothing to me!"

"Give her to Prince?"

"What will you do with her?"

"Prince knows."

"She has friends who will be searching for her. They may come here."

"Prince will keep her safe where no one will ever find her."

"Look here," said Carter Wayne; "this girl is a bother to me. Do you understand? It is her sister I want. I was a howling idiot to take the trouble to drag this weak creature here, but she is my wife."

"Ugh! Gal your wife? How come so?"

"Had to take her. Now, I wouldn't mind if she were to stop breathing all at once. Do you understand?"

The half-blood nodded.

"Yes. How much pay?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Prince will do job."

"Then I won't come back here."

"Pay now."

"Yes, here is your money."

The dastardly villain gave the half-blood five golden eagles, and the eyes of the chosen tool glittered as he jingled them in his hands.

"Gal never bother you any more," he declared.

Without a word, Carter Wayne mounted his tired horse and rode away from the lonely hut, leaving the poor girl who trusted him to the tender mercies of the miserable half-breed.

Prince re-entered the hut, finding Ivy asleep on the cot. She was quite exhausted by what she had passed through, and her hollow cheeks were wet with her tears.

The half-breed sat down and lighted his pipe. For a long time he sat smoking and gazing at the girl.

At length, he put down the pipe and arose to his feet. As he started to approach the couch, Ivy opened her eyes and looked squarely at him. Alarmed with fears she could not control she sat up, shrieking with terror.

In another moment the dusky-faced wretch had grasped her, as if incensed at her fear of him, but with all her strength she fought.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help! help!"

"Nobody hears gal," declared Prince.

"She my prisoner!"

"Bet a hoss you're off yer nut, dirty face!" cried a strange voice, and a queer-looking old fellow leaped in at the open door. "I've got ears, an' they're in workin' order jist at this present time, you bet!"

It was Old Billy Bedam!

The queer old vagrant flew at the half-breed like an uncaged tiger. Spat, spat! Prince felt Old Billy's fists twice, and he was knocked down in a most scientific manner. Then the old man leaped upon the half-breed and pinned him to the floor, while he rapidly made him secure with cords which he drew from a capacious side-pocket.

Prince was a fighter, but he had been taken by surprise, and Old Billy's blows had been terrific. When he recovered from the shock, the half-breed found his hands secured behind him.

"I hain't goin' ter tie yer feet, dirty face," assured Billy Bedam, stepping back and viewing his work with satisfaction. "P'fizen skunk though ye be, I don't want yer blood on my han's, an' ye might die o' starvation ef I trussed up yer feet."

The girl was sitting on the edge of the cot, panting and wild-eyed.

"Don't be skeered o' me, miss!" urged Billy, ducking his shaggy head. "I'm ther great pertecter o' female loveliness, I be! Ef thar's anythin' I deespise, it's ther critter w'at hurts a woman in ary way. Now, I'm goin' ter take ye back ter yer sister an' yer home, safe an' sound—you bet I am!"

"But I don't want to go back there," protested Ivy. "I—I can't go back!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I can't tell you!"

Old Billy sat down and coaxed her until he had obtained the whole story from her lips. His face hardened and a shadow crept into his eyes.

"You can't stay hyer, miss," he decided. "You must see thet. So thar hain't nothin' else fer ye to do but jest go back. I'll take keer o' ye, an', ef Carter Wayne is a squar' man, I'll make it right so you kin see him ag'in. I give yer my word fer that."

There was something about him to inspire confidence, and the girl decided to trust him fully and completely.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD BILLY UNMASKS.

OLD BILLY's white horse was waiting outside the hut, and the vagrant assisted the girl to the deceptive creature's back.

"Jinuary's a good one, ef she hain't none on good looks," he observed, with a grin. "She kin make time, you bet. I got fooled on her myself, but w'en I saw ther kind o' critter she wuz, I jest planked down my rhino an' scooped her in. Thet was only a few days ergo, but she got so she thinks as much o' me 'zif we'd allus bin tergether."

This did not interest the girl, who was really too weak and exhausted to bear another jaunt. Old Billy kept up a running stream of talk, climbing up behind the girl and starting away, his sinewy arm supporting her.

They rode slowly. The sun was well up in the eastern sky, and the day seemed perfect.

For some reason, Old Billy chose the deep shadows of a ravine, the bottom of which was only touched by the sun at high noon.

They had proceeded some miles when the vagrant suddenly drew rein. Just as he stopped a shot sounded above, and a bullet whistled past the old man's head.

"I reckoned you wuz thar," grimly muttered the strange old fellow. "Jest show your nose once more."

As if at Old Billy's invitation, the pursuer's head appeared over some rocks far above.

It was Prince, the half-blood, who in some way had freed himself of the cords Old Billy put upon him and had trailed him to that spot.

Flinging up a hand, the vagrant took a snap shot at the dusky features of the villainous half-breed. A cry of pain came down the rocks, and the dusky face vanished.

"Reckon thet'll l'arn him a few!" chuckled Old Billy. "This is ther wrong crowd ter crowd inter without a invitation."

They went on for some miles, until the ravine was about to lead them out on an open plain. Then the man halted.

"I've got a Winchester rifle tucked away up 'mongst ther rocks," he explained. "I'd kind o' like to hev it erlong, fer I may git inter a regler scrummage. Jest you stay here with Jinuary while I go after thet thar gun. I'll be right back in a minute, leetle gal, so ye needn't be skeered."

She expressed a desire to get upon the ground, to rest herself, and he assisted her to dismount, after which he found her a good seat.

Old Billy clambered up over the rocks as if he were a mountain goat, pausing far above to wave his hand at the weary girl, who had not stirred from the rock on which he placed her. Then he disappeared.

It took him somewhat longer to find the rifle than he had anticipated, and nearly twenty minutes elapsed before he returned. Then he was astonished to find Ivy gone; but imagining she must be close in the vicinity, he called to her.

There was no answer.

"Hang it!" muttered Billy. "I don't think she kin hev gone fur."

He began searching for the young woman, but soon became convinced the task of finding her was not to prove so easy. Although he called her name again and again, only the echoes answered his shouts.

The old man was sorely puzzled and troubled. His old white horse had not been molested, which caused him to believe the girl had wandered away of her own accord; yet he could not understand why she should do so. And, weak and exhausted as she was, she certainly could not go far.

He resolved not to give up until Ivy was found, but the hours slipped away without the accomplishment of his purpose. Still, he would not give up.

The darkness of another night found Old Billy still searching vainly for the lost Ivy, a feeling of despair in his heart. He was finally forced to confess that she could not be found, and then he fancied she might have fallen once more into the power of Prince, the half-breed.

Back to the half-breed's hut then hurried Billy Bedam, but only to find the place deserted. Then he turned toward Cross Bar Ranch, having determined to report all to Gertie Grant.

The old fellow had ridden many miles when he heard the rattle of fire-arms. Some thing told him an engagement between cowboys and nesters was taking place, and he headed for the spot immediately.

The moonlight showed him a party of men in full flight, while some yelling cowboys were pursuing them. Shots were being fired by both parties.

Without hesitation, the vagrant rode down to join the cowboys, something leading him to choose that course. He was able to cut them off, and scarcely attracted a glance, so eager were the cattlemen to overtake the fleeing fence-cutters.

One of the cattlemen's horses had been injured in the encounter, and the animal was slowly dropping behind, although its rider strained every nerve to keep the creature with the others. There was something familiar about this man's figure, and Old Billy uttered a low cry of satisfaction when he approached nearer.

The rider of the injured horse was Nobby Nat, or, as he had confessed himself really to be—Carter Wayne.

Old Billy Bedam uncoiled a lariat and prepared for business. At the proper time the rope circled through the air, and the noose shot forward.

Wayne was paying no attention to Old Billy, and the rope caught him fairly. In another instant he was jerked from the saddle, striking the ground with terrible force.

Leaping lightly from his steed and bending over the man he had lassoed, Old Billy discerned that the man had been rendered unconscious by the shock. He might be dead, but the vagrant did not pause to examine him then.

Lifting Wayne, the strange man flung him across the back of the white horse, after which he mounted also.

The cowboys did not notice what had befallen their comrade, and so Old Billy rode away with his captive without being challenged or molested.

Halting in a protected valley, the owner of the white horse dismounted, lowering Carter Wayne to the ground. Then, producing a flask of liquor, he began working over the unconscious villain. In the course of a few minutes he was rewarded by seeing Wayne open his eyes and stare wildly about.

"He! he! he!" chuckled Billy, rubbing his hands together with keen satisfaction. "Kinder s'prisin', hain't it, partner? Waal, sech things will happen in ther best regulated famblys—yes they will."

"What—has—happened?" asked Wayne, after he made an attempt to rise, falling back with a groan. "I remember a—a—shock, and then—"

"You woke up ter find yerself hyer. Kind o' a presto change trick, wuzn't it? How do you feel?"

"Every bone in my body is sore. I wonder if my legs or arms are broken?"

"Reckon not. You're jest broke up, so to spoke. I don't wonder, fer you tuck a dump from ther back o' your hoss."

A look of suspicion flashed across Wayne's face, being revealed by the misty moonlight.

"I didn't fall," he declared.

"Nary time," agreed Old Billy, cheerfully. "You wuz jerked out o' ther saddle in a most skientific manner."

"And you—you—"

The vagrant nodded.

"Yep, I done it!" he grinned. "I wanted to hev a leetle talk with ye, you see. Now, don't git riled. It shows bad breedin' ter git riled at leetle things."

"Curse you, old man! what do you mean?"

"Don't sweer, Carter, dear! It's naughty."

"Who are you, I say?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Then look!"

With a swift motion Old Billy removed a false beard and wig, and a cry of fear and amazement broke from Wayne's pallid lips.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESPERATE GIRL'S MAD ACT.

THE gray light of another morning was showing in the east when a man came staggering up to Lone Star Ranch, his appearance being that of a person who had tramped many weary miles.

Major Blukes had spent a restless night and risen before all the stars pale in the sky. He was smoking on the veranda when the man came slowly up.

"Great Scot?" he cried. "Is that you or your ghost, Kirk?"

"It is I," replied the voice of Nobby Nat.

"Well, where in the name of all that is wonderful have you been? You went out with the boys last night, but you didn't come back with them, although your horse showed

up. They said they had searched for you everywhere. I reckoned you had been plunked by the nesters."

"Not quite so bad as that, major. All the same, I came near never turning up at Lone Star again."

"Sit down, sit down!" cried the veteran. "Tell us about it."

Nat sat down on the veranda.

"Have you seen that old fellow called Billy Bedam?" he asked.

The major nodded.

"Well," continued the Tenderfoot Detective, "that old devil came near being the death of me. In the scrimmage with the nesters last night my horse was injured."

"Clipped on the right foreleg with a bullet," said Major Blukes.

"That caused me to fall behind the others," Nat went on. "My attention was entirely taken up with the pursuit, and I did not see that old devil when he cut down upon me, mounted on that deceptive white nag of his. The result was that he roped me out of the saddle. When I struck the ground I was knocked senseless. The next I knew he had me foul, and I was so sore and stunned I could not move. Then he gloated over me to his heart's satisfaction."

"But—but why should he do anything of this kind?" asked the puzzled major.

"The truth is, Old Billy is not what he seems."

"I fancied as much."

"He is in disguise."

"Yes."

"He took off his false beard and wig, and he proved to be an old enemy of mine—a rival for the hand of a certain young lady, some years ago. He hates me, and he sought revenge. Had I not been fortunate enough to escape him, he might have killed me."

"How did you escape?"

"He dragged me to a cave and left me there, saying he would return by night. He supposed I was securely bound, but I was not, and I managed to get free. I am here."

"Well, it will not be good for Mr. Billy Bedam if he shows his head about here again."

The two men sat on the veranda and talked for some time, and then they entered the house together.

The sun had not been risen more than two hours before Gertie Grant rode boldly up to Lone Star Ranch. She was alone, but she did not seem to hesitate about entering the ranch, for she rapped boldly on the door.

One minute later, the girl was in the presence of Major Blukes. Her face was pale and her eyes showed signs of sleeplessness.

"I have come for my sister," she said, looking the man straight in the eye.

"I know nothing about your sister, Miss Grant," he asserted.

"Do you speak the truth, major?"

His face flushed.

"The solemn truth, young lady. What about your sister?"

"She was kidnapped from her room, and the wretch who stole her away tried to fire the ranch. He would have succeeded, but that the flames were discovered by a fortunate chance."

"And you thought—just what?"

"It looked like a blow from my enemies."

The President of the U. S. A. Cattle Co. assumed his most dignified manner.

"I do not do my fighting in such a beastly way," he asserted.

"I have other enemies besides you, major."

"I am not your enemy, young lady. If you cut my fences, I have to defend my property. That is all, but I'm no enemy of Miss Grant."

"Instead of fighting, you seek to have me arrested."

"If you were a man, I would not resort

to law. But, that is the most effective way to deal with you, Miss Grant, I think."

"Thus far it has not proved very successful."

"I confess not."

"I believe my other enemy is beneath this roof."

"Who is he?"

"Carter Wayne."

"There is no such person here."

"He is known to you as Nathan Kirk."

"What—Nobby Nat?"

"Exactly. Will you tell him I wish to see him?"

"Certainly."

The major left the room, returning with Nat in a very short time.

The Girl Rancher's eyes blazed when they rested on the young Easterner.

"Carter Wayne, where is my sister?" she demanded, in ringing tones.

"Would I could tell you, Miss Grant," was the sober reply.

"I believe you know!"

"I do not."

"Pah! What does your word amount to! You are the one who crept into Ivy's room, and lured her away!"

"You are mistaken."

"I knew you would deny it; but, that does not count. Your word goes for nothing, Carter Wayne! Only you could have crept into the house and lured Ivy away without arousing the place. You are the one!"

"I see it is useless to deny it."

"Then you confess?"

"By no means. I did *not* do the deed, but you do not believe me when I say so. I knew she was induced to leave the ranch."

Gertie started forward.

"You knew it? That is a fatal admission! How *could* you have known it unless you were the one who kidnapped her?"

"I saw her with the man who took her from Cross Bar Ranch."

A low cry came from the Girl Rancher's lips.

"That is very thin! Where did you see her?"

"Many miles from here."

"Where?"

"I cannot direct you to the spot."

"You *will* not! I am not deceived in the least! You induced her away into the hills somewhere, and I believe you have killed her, you dastard!"

The man winced a trifle before her scathing language, but still his eyes met hers boldly.

"Instead of that, I tried to save her from her foe. I would have succeeded but a cruel fate was against me."

With each moment Gertie's passion grew more intense until finally, without the least warning, she snatched out a revolver, crying:

"You'll never deceive another girl, Carter Wayne! Die, you wretch!"

Then she fired point-blank at him.

Down went the man!

Wheeling instantly: Gertie Grant dashed from the room to the open air, where her horse was waiting. Leaping on the back of the thoroughbred black, she dashed away toward Cross Bar Ranch, the revolver still grasped in her hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BEGINNING OF REVELATIONS.

BARELY had Gertie left the ranch when Nobby Nat arose to his feet—unharméd!

Major Blukes had been standing like a man dazed, but now he cried:

"Where are you hit, Kirk?"

"I am not touched," was the reply. "I saw she was going to shoot, and dropped just in time to avoid the bullet, which you will find in the wall behind me."

"Great Caesar! but you *are* in luck! I thought she had finished you, sure!"

Nat [was thoughtful for a few moments, and then he said:

"There may as well be an end to this business now. I have not obtained all the information about Hustler Hal that I desire, but I do not fancy being taken any longer for a target. As you know, major, my mission in these parts was not to detect nesters, although it was given out as such. Instead of that, I came to arrest Colt Harvey, a murderer. I have found Harvey, but the condition of affairs here caused me to put off his arrest for a time that I might try to straighten out some other things. Instead of straightening them out, I have tangled them worse than ever. I mean to put an end to this folly. I shall need half-a-dozen men for several hours."

"You can have them, Kirk."

Thirty minutes later Nobby Nat and six cattlemen rode from Lone Star Ranch, heading due south.

A ride of two hours brought them to a broken section, and there they proceeded more slowly. Nat then informed the cowboys that he had a captive concealed in a cave just ahead.

When they came in sight of the mouth of the cave they were surprised to see three figures just coming out.

They were Hustler Hal, Ivy Grant and another.

Immediately the cowboys surrounded the trio and made them captives, despite the Hustler's inclination to fight.

This done, they were carried back to Lone Star Ranch.

That afternoon Major Blukes wrote a letter to Gertie, every word being dictated by Nobby Nat. It ran as follows:

"LONE STAR RANCH, September 23, 18—.
"TO MISS GERTRUDE GRANT,
"Owner of Cross Bar Ranch:—
"MY DEAR MISS GRANT:—I have the pleasure of informing you that your sister Ivy is safe at Lone Star. Will you be kind enough to come here to-night, as it is very important you should. I guarantee you perfect safety and protection. You need not fear being arrested or molested in any way.
"Respectfully yours,
"AGNUS BLUKES,
"President U. S. A. Cattle Co."

To this Ivy Grant added:

"Come, dear sister, please come! I am truly here safe, and I am longing for you."
IVY."

It is needless to say Gertie lost little time in getting to Lone Star Ranch, but the shadows of night had fallen when she reached the place. Ivy greeted her when she entered, but the invalid was too weak to rise from the couch on which she was reposing.

"Dear, dear little sister!" sobbed Gertie. "I feared I should never see you again. How you must have suffered! But Carter Wayne will never trouble you again. He is dead."

She looked up to see Nobby Nat standing near by! A cry of astonishment broke from her lips.

"Wretch!" she gasped. "Did my bullet fail to end your miserable life?"

"I am happy to say it did," replied Nat, composedly.

"Then it shall not fail now!"

She would have drawn a revolver, but Ivy caught her wrist with desperate strength, almost shrieking:

"Gertie, Gertie! stop! He is our best friend!"

"You do not know him, sister mine! Let me avenge the wrongs he has done you and me!"

Ivy would not release her until she promised not to shoot.

"He it was who saved me from Carter Wayne," asserted the sick girl.

"Why, he is Carter Wayne himself!"

"He is not Carter Wayne, Gertie, dear; he is Nathan Kirk."

Gertie looked puzzled and troubled.

"It is true," affirmed Nat. "Everything

shall be made clear; but, in the first place, allow me to show you the man who murdered your father."

A door swung open and two boys entered, escorting a manacled man between them.

That man was Hustler Hal!

"I have proof that this wretch killed Graham Grant," declared Nat. "I took your father's watch from his person. But, there is another charge against him—one for which he will have to suffer the extreme penalty of the law. This man is by profession a crook and burglar. In the East he was known as Colt Harvey. In the pursuit of his business he happened to kill a wealthy gentleman, and promptly took to flight. A big reward was offered for his capture, and I set out to run him down. I came to Lone Star Ranch apparently to work against the nesters, but that was simply a blind to cover my real business. I knew Colt Harvey was somewhere about, but I was not sure Hustler Hal was my man."

There was a look of incredulity on Gertie Grant's lovely face. She could not believe this was the truth—it all seemed to her so improbable—so incredible.

"He is lying," cried Hustler Hal, reading the girl's thoughts aright. "This is part of a plot. Call your men, Miss Grant, and take me from this villain!"

"He is telling the truth," asserted Ivy, spiritedly. "I know it to be so!"

Richards raved.

"Have you forgotten it was I who found you wandering helplessly amid the hills?" he asked. "Have you forgotten I saved you from death?"

"No!" she replied. "Neither have I forgotten the infamous compact you entered into with Carter Wayne. But for the appearance of the Lone Star cattlemen, I would not be alive now. I was not to be taken back to Cross Bar."

Richards was silenced, and Nobby Nat ordered him led away.

"Now comes a part of my revelation that you will doubt more than everything else," remarked the detective. "Yet I shall be able to prove its truth. Wait patiently a few moments, and I will return."

He left the room, and they waited five minutes. Then two men entered, one of whom was Old Billy Bedam, while the other, who wore manacles, was—

Carter Wayne!

CHAPTER XVII.

A FULL EXPLANATION.

GERTIE GRANT started in amazement, while Major Blukes grinned knowingly.

"I reckon this yere's the critter w'at's raised all the deviltry," cheerfully observed Old Billy, his hand on the shoulder of the manacled villain. "I've ketched him dead to rights, an' I must say he is a bird! We don't look like twins, do we? Waal, we hain't nary bit o' 'lashun, thanks be ter goodness! Ef we wuz, I'd go out an' shoot myself whar nobody'd need ter trouble 'bout burryin' me—yes, I jest would!"

Gertie did not speak; she was waiting, in keenest expectancy.

"Tell ye something," Old Billy went on, in his odd manner. "This feller looks monst'rus like Nat Kirk; but, he hain't Nat—not much! He's ther son of a gun as monkeyed with Miss Ivy's fections, while Nat didn't know thar wuz sech a whelp in existence—clean fact. He's bin palmin' hisself off as Nat Kirk."

"You see, it wuz this way: Nat kem hyar purpose ter rope in Colt Harvey, an' Carter Wayne turned up later. He saw Nat an' found out how the land laid, then like a dirty skunk he is, he resolved ter step inter Nat's shoes. One day he roped Nat an' sacked him to a cave back in the hills, whar

he stripped his pris'ner o' his clothes an' putt 'em on him own self. See his game?"

"Oh, he's a dandy cuss—he is!"

"It worked—yes, it did. The bogus turned up at Lone Star hyer, an' ev'rybody tuck him for Nat, for a fact. Then he wuz sent over ter 'rest Gertie Grant thet very night. Thet wuz ther fu'st day o' his leetle game. That 'restin' business didn't work wuth a continental—oh, no! an' he wuz made ter merryther gal he wronged—the mis'ble shyster!"

"All this time, the mean rip thought Nat Kirk wuz back in a cave 'mong ther hills. He hed blocked the mouth o' ther cave with a big stone, an' he thought Nobby Nat'd die thar. But Nat got his fightin' gloves on an' dug out. Then he went to Prairie Valley an' bought a hoss an' got the disguise he hed sent East fer, three weeks afore. Riggid in thet disguise, he started in ter bu'st up Carter Wayne's plans, an' I swan' he succeeded, some!"

"Wayne got Miss Ivy ter skip with him, an' then he hired a half-breed red-skin ter finish ther gal. I happened on hand in time, an' I punched ther dirty skunk a few. Then I took Ivy an' started ter Kerry her to Cross Bar, but she got skeered o' me an' run away. I hunted fer her, but didn't find her. Colt Harvey found her long arterward, an' he was takin' her to Cross Bar w'en he heerd Wayne hollerin' in ther cave whar he was tied up."

"It was I that put Wayne in thet cave. I roped ther critter off his hoss an' kerried him ter ther place whar he hed left Nat Kirk to die, an' thar I left him. Then I kem hyer ter Lone Star an' told Major Blukes a big cock an' bull story."

"Say, hain't you people gittin' tired o' this kinder dialect? I swan I be, an' I'm goin' ter make a shift."

Removing the false beard and wig, Old Billy Bedam stood before them the perfect double of Carter Wayne!

"Miss Grant," he said, soberly, "you will now see that what I told you about having a double is true. You got me mixed with this execrable villain, and the result has been anything but pleasant, to all of us. I am Nathan Kirk, and *this* is the man who wronged poor Ivy. I have been able to convince her, at last, of her husband's villainy. I don't know as I have made my explanation perfectly plain, but I have tried to do so, for all I have stated is the solemn truth."

The Girl Rancher could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses, and she did not trust her tongue to speak.

The Tenderfoot Detective was triumphant, but his greatest satisfaction was in knowing he was vindicated in the eyes of the brave girl he so honorably loved.

Carter Wayne was sat at liberty on his promise to leave the country. He went south into old Mexico, where he was afterward killed by a bandit pard, with whom he quarreled.

Major Blukes's heart softened, for he actually sold to Gertrude Grant, for a nominal price, a strip of land that gave her a cattle-run to Clearwater Creek.

Of course the nesters were defeated in the struggle against a superior power, for the U. S. A. Cattle Co. were supported by several other large ranchers, who also strung barbed wire fences about their property, and so run the little cattle-raisers off the field. Big money *always* does that, you know.

Poor little Ivy did not recover, and with the coming of another spring she was laid at rest.

Gertrude found the ranch very lonely after that.

Nat Kirk, the Tenderfoot Detective, took Colt Harvey East, where he was tried for murder and duly sentenced to the death he

deserved. Before he paid the penalty of his crimes, he confessed he had killed Graham Grant, as the shrewd detective had determined.

Nathan Kirk sat staring at a scented sheet of paper on which was written:

"DEAR NAT:—Come to me! Oh, come to me!
"GERTIE."

At length he arose and paced twice the length of the room.

"Shall I go?" he asked himself. "I had resolved never to see her again, but—but this appeal seems drawing me to her. Poor Gertie! She must be lonely now. Why should I not answer her appeal? Yes, I will go."

Two hours later he was being carried westward on a very fast Express, but which traveled all too slowly for this impatient passenger.

A beautiful summer day was drawing to a close out on the great prairie when a horseman reached the crest of a swell from which he could look down on Cross Bar Ranch. Around him were grazing herds of cattle, while the rich grass beneath the feet of his horse was bespangled with bright flowers. The soft breeze was laden with softest of nature's perfumes.

Away in the west the sun had sunk to rest, but the sky was emblazoned with pennants and guidons and banners of crimson, purple and gold. To the east a bluish haze rested on the plain. But the horseman did not note the beauty of the perfect scene, for his eyes were fixed on the ranch.

"I wonder if she is waiting for me down there?" he murmured. "How shall I be received? Even after all had been explained, she allowed me to go away without a word. That I thought was the end—that her love for me was but a memory."

He saw a figure come out of the ranch-house and walk slowly to the west. There was no mistaking the person. It was Gertrude.

The horseman rode down to the ranch, where his animal was taken by a cowboy.

"Miss Grant has gone to her sister's grave," explained the man, as he led the horse away. "She will be back soon."

The visitor made no reply, but walked away to the west, thinking he would find her.

Some distance from the house there was a quiet little hollow where the shadows of night were gathering thickly. His feet made no noise on the soft grass as he descended into the hollow, where, beside a mound of earth at the head of which rose a pure marble shaft, a grief-bowed figure was kneeling.

She did not hear him, and he paused a short distance away. She had brought some flowers which she was arranging on the grave.

"Poor little Ivy!" she murmured, with a broken sob. "You are gone forever, and I am so lonely—so lonely! Will Nat ever come to me again? My heart is calling to him constantly, and it seems that he must know I love him—I love him!"

"Gertie!"

She rose to her feet—turned—saw him. With a great cry of gladness, she sprung into his outstretched arms, and then she felt his kisses on her lips.

They were standing amid the shadows, but the golden glow of the perfect sunset illumined their happy faces.

THE END.

Broadway Billy's Bluff;

OR,

THE MUTE CHINAMAN AMONG THE CROOKS.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,

AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THIS WAS STRANGE.

"CHRISTOPHER COLUMBIA! why don't something turn up? We have got our breath now, after our last tussle with wickedness, and we want to pitch in again before our muscles stiffen. What do you say, Silent Seth?"

The Silent Shadower nodded, but said nothing.

He had nothing to say.

"And what do you say, boss?" and Harry Harry turned to Broadway Billy, their chief, that rising young detective of the metropolis.

"I agree with you, Harry," Billy made answer. "We don't want to be idle. We are cocked and primed for any consarned diffikilty that may pop up, so, let 'er pop; sweet, pertaters, yes!"

Billy gave voice to his old-time exclamation once in awhile, just to delight his admiring apprentices.

And they enjoyed it, for in their more youthful days, before they ever thought of becoming identified with him in his work, they had read of his exploits with bated breath.

"Crackers an' cheese!" cried Harry, "that is the talk! Seth, I don't see how you can sit there like a Sphinx, when the jeebeeb is jeebing on his jeeber like this! Come, wake up and say something! What's the use of living, if you don't let your chin wag?"

"Nothing to say."

"Well, then, say it. I haven't anything to say either, but I keep my harp in tune just the same, so I'll be ready to play when something is to be said."

"And perhaps Seth gives his tongue plenty of rest so that he can use it all the more to the point when the occasion requires?" Billy suggested.

"Maybe that's it, boss; I don't know."

"Be that as it may," Billy went on, "each of you is well in his place. There was never such a talker as I was when a kid, and my ready tongue has helped me out of many a difficulty. On the other hand, too much tongue has gotten me into many a difficulty. So you are evenly balanced."

"It would never do to have two such stoicks as Seth," Harry observed.

"That's true; and I could never stand the chatter of two rattleboxes like you, Harry."

The opening of the office door interrupted their further talk.

A woman came into the office, a young woman, perhaps twenty-two years of age, one who was rather good-looking.

She was well-dressed, her face showed her to be a person of intelligence, and when she spoke it was shown that she had a firm, musical voice, and that she was a woman of some education.

"Do I address Mr. Weston, the detective?" she asked.

"Yes, madam, I am Mr. Weston," Billy answered, rising with a slight bow.

"I have called to see you on a matter of business, sir."

"Please be seated, and let me know in what way I can serve you, if it is my service you seek."

"And it is, sir. But, these young men—?"

A glance toward Harry and Seth, who had immediately taken their places at the other end of the office.

"My assistants, madam. I will send them out, if you wish, but they are fully intrusted with whatever business I take hold of, and if it is detective work you require—"

"It is all right, sir; let them remain. It is detective work I require. I have come to engage you to find a missing man, Mr. Weston."

And thereupon she proceeded to reveal a "case" which deeply interested and excited the detective knight and his boy aids.

The case was this:

This young lady was Miss Gretna Granton, from Granton, New Jersey, where her father owned and operated two large mills. The nearest railway station was Brisbane, eight miles away.

At Brisbane was the bank through which the mill-owner transacted his business, and from which he drew the funds, weekly by special messenger, to pay off his great number of employees.

This messenger was his cashier and general assistant, named David Haswick, and to whom the young lady was really engaged. Hence her deep interest in the matter.

This young man started quite late one night, from Brisbane, on horseback, for Granton, having on his person money to a considerable amount.

He did not reach Granton, but though the riderless horse reached his stable the rider was mysteriously missing, and every and all search failed to solve the mystery of his disappearance.

Had he run away?

Was he murdered?

Had he been abducted?

These were the questions to solve:—this was

Broadway Billy's new case; and as the young lady revealed several incidental circumstances that gave a motive for his seizure and perhaps murder, the case at once assumed several, complicated conditions.

He had, apparently, disappeared at Granton Graveyard—a mile or more from the village. This was an old burying-place, in whose vicinity were the ruins of a once elegant—almost baronial—villa.

These ruins were owned and tenanted in a restored section by a singular personage known as the Mad Chemist—who was said to be pursuing experiments day and night, in the transmutation of iron into gold.

But more: the whole vicinity of the ruins and the graveyard was made uncanny by the appearance of a ghost, every night, from eleven o'clock until two, and so real was this ghost visitant that everybody in all that region shunned the spot.

It was ascertained, by careful examination, that at the very gate of the old cemetery the horse that Haswick rode had taken fright and made a furious run for home, and the inference was generally that at that very spot the man and money had disappeared.

Broadway Billy ere long was at Brisbane, and with apparent lack of caution avowed both who he was and his purpose of coming there, and in furtherance of this seemingly absurd way of doing detective work, hired a horse from the landlord of the hotel, and, against the innkeeper's warning, avowed his purpose to go out to the cemetery.

The crowd at the hotel wished him a safe trip, declaring they would be anxious to learn how he got through.

Billy found the road a fine one, and being an expert rider, thanks to his Texas experience, he enjoyed the trip and went along at a good rate of speed.

He had made more particular inquiry about the road as it drew near to the cemetery, and as he approached that point he knew just about when to expect the cemetery to come into view.

The night was not dark, though there was no moon, and presently the ghostly headstones broke upon his sight.

"Well, here I am," Billy said to himself, bringing his horse down to a walk, "and now let his his Ghostship stalk forth and I'll try a sly shot at him and see what the effect will be."

He was proceeding down a gently sloping hill, and the cemetery lay at the bottom of the descent, on the right-hand side of the road.

Along the road in front of the cemetery was a stone wall, and in the middle of that wall an iron gate.

Billy's sight was keen, even at night, and these points were easily made out.

Then, near the gate, on the side from which he was approaching, was a large tree, and under the shadow of that, as he made out when he came nearer still, was a big vault.

The young detective approached at a walk, his revolver in hand, ready for instant use.

As he was approaching the tree, a bluish light suddenly surrounded the vault, and the horse gave a snort of terror!

Billy spoke to the animal, and held the rein with a firm grip, his revolver in hand.

Almost simultaneously with the appearance of the light, there came forth from the front of the vault what appeared to be a ghost of the genuine sort.

The horse gave a cry of fright, but its rider held it firmly, and at the same time Billy let go a bullet straight at the apparition, whatever it was, one that was intended to do damage, too.

But no damage was done, apparently, for the ghost gave forth the most ghostly laugh imaginable, and lifting one spectral arm, with a part of its flowing white robe, pointed straight at the daring detective and called out, in deep tone:

"Rash man, return whence you came! Nothing but death is here for you; your doom is sealed if you ride on to yon village!"

Billy's response was another shot, the effect of which was no more visible than that of the first.

For the balance of this sparkling detective story—full of the liveliest kind of doings, in which Broadway Billy and his Brace of Boy Beagles show their pluck and skill gloriously, see BEADLE'S HALF DIME LIBRARY, No. 821, now ready and for sale by the newsdealer whose name appears at the foot of the next column.

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